

Springfield sheds negative image for better visage

■ The town just east of Eugene has had the reputation of a backwards community, but downtown improvements and new infrastructure bring it up to speed

By Clayton Cone
for the Emerald

Carpenters laid out boards and nailed them into place, creating steps to the mezzanine of the soon-to-be-opened Springfield Art Center on Main Street. In the background, judges for the Aug. 25 Mayor's Art Show looked over paintings and sculptures for debut at the Springfield Filbert Festival.

All the activity was just part of what Springfield Communications Director Rosemary Pryor called the "renaissance of the downtown

areas, the critical-care hospital and economic diversification.

But all these bright spots fade in comparison to the topic that most quickens her speech — that Springfield's downtown area is on the short list for a new federal courthouse.

"We're all, of course, watching with bated breath this whole saga with the federal courthouse," she said.

"If the federal government should decide to site a major federal facility in downtown Springfield, there's no question in my mind that that will simply unleash a torrent of interest in downtown Springfield. Investment opportunities exist like crazy there."

Pryor said the General Services Administration has been narrowing down preferred sites between Springfield and Eugene.

She also said that had Springfield not been changing over the past 10 years, it would not even be on that list now.

"The whole identity of Springfield is evolving significantly," she said. "We were once a timber town, and our roots will always be there.

"To be blunt, we're very proud of that because it's good, honest labor," she said. "But we're no longer a timber town."

In fact, only one forest products company, Weyerhaeuser, makes it into the top three employers in town. Weyerhaeuser boasts slightly more than half the number of employees of McKenzie-Willamette Hospital and approximately just



Azle Malinao-Alvarez Emerald

A former timber town, neighboring Springfield is coming into its own through community improvement projects, a revitalization of downtown and the possible construction of a new federal courthouse.

over thirty percent of the employees working for the Springfield High School District, according to Pryor.

SONY comes in as the fourth largest employer at 430, she said.

Moreover, there are more people employed in the wood-products industry in Eugene than there are in Springfield, she said.

But the image of Springfield,

even aside from the 1998 Thurston High School shooting, may still be tainted.

In an informal poll on the University campus during inter-session, six out of eight people approached declined to comment about the city of more than 50,000 people just across the Willamette River. One simply said, "It's going to be all negative."

"What we know is true, from the comments that we hear and the experiences that we have, is that some people haven't updated their picture of Springfield," Pryor said.

Both people who would speak about Springfield were residents of that city.

"I love it. It's just a good place to

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