



# ODE TO NODE

## What the hell is nodal development? And why does our future depend on it?

By Alan Pittman

**N**ode. The word evokes images of swollen pre-cancerous lymph in an arm pit, or a nubbin on a toad. But for Eugene, a node means something quite different. The city and state want 1,600 acres of Eugene covered in up to 34 different nodes in a key effort to save local livability. But the problem is, no one still knows exactly what node means.

The Eugene city council is “all over the map” about what a node means, complained Councilor Scott Meisner at a recent meeting. “We could all sit down and [each] write 10 different words about what a node means and there would be 90 different words, many of them oxymoronic.”

Officially, a node is “a mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly land use pattern that seeks to increase concentrations of population and employment in well-defined areas with good transit service, a mix of diverse and compatible land uses, and public and private improvements designed to be pedestrian and transit oriented.” But that’s all very vague. As the city found out in the last few weeks, when it comes to nodes, the devil is in the details.

When the city was putting nodes in largely undeveloped fields where few people lived and worked, there were few problems. The City Council passed regulations for nodes at Chase Gardens behind Autzen Stadium and Royal Avenue in far west Eugene with little opposition. But then came the 29th and Willamette node in south Eugene and the Walnut Street Station node east of the UO.

“This is crazy,” said Ronald Zauner, owner of the Willamette Spa. At a April 14 public hearing on the south Eugene node, Zauner and a parade of other business owners and developers said node regulations requiring that new buildings and major additions be more than one floor and be built along the street would hurt business and make improvements impossible.

Nodal rules “would make it impossible” for Standard Insurance, owner of Willamette Plaza, to carry through with plans to redevelop the shopping center at 29th and Willamette with a larger grocery store, a smaller drug store with a drive-through and landscaping,

Trond Ingvaldsen, company vice president, testified.

Standard plans to “dramatically improve” sidewalks, architecture and parking lot landscaping at the shopping center, but not to increase the density of the development at all. The company and its consultants and tenants argued in written testimony that the minimum density requirements for the node would be four times denser than the single floor project it’s proposing to build by 2005. The regulations would require investors to spend tens of millions of dollars to build huge, expensive multiple story mixed use buildings and parking garages that couldn’t be supported by market rents or interested tenants, the company claimed.

Nodal development “maybe works in green fields,” testified Standard Insurance attorney Jim Spickerman, but, “to redevelop properties, you have to deal with the practicalities.”

Businesses at the hearing argued that restricting garages and other auto-dependent development in the node would just force the area’s many regional customers to drive further for services. Several business owners objected to a proposal to reduce Willamette from four lanes to two lanes with a center turn lane to add room for wider sidewalks, landscaping and bike lanes.

“Absurd,” said Matthew Lesh, owner of the Santa Fe Burrito company of the proposal for a narrower street.

“Revitalization is not needed,” said David Nelkin, owner of Eugene Coin and Jewelry on Willamette, arguing that sidewalks and bike lanes needed no improvement.

The next month, the council heard from home owners angered by a nodal proposal for Walnut Street Station, east of the UO.

“I’m pretty pissed off,” said Michael Keenan of nodal plans to increase density in the area of tree-lined streets and well-kept older homes. “This kind of neighborhood attack is a planning nightmare,” he said. “We have a neighborhood, don’t screw it up.”

Almost every front lawn in the Walnut node has a protest sign with the word “node” and a red slash through it. Two dozen home

owners in the neighborhood showed up to testify that increased density and requirements to build new structures to the curb would threaten the character of their neighborhood. They didn’t want older homes and trees bulldozed to build cheap student housing.

The area is “one of the few really nice historical neighborhoods in Eugene,” testified Douglas Daniell. But with nodal development, “higher density means student apartments means you’re degrading the neighborhood massively.”

“Families won’t be as likely to move in and will be likely to move out, if you increase the density,” said Elise Weldon.

Jeff Morton, manager of the Quality Inn on Franklin Blvd. complained that nodal requirements would make it impossible for his company to improve its motel economically. “If you pass nodal, it’s a no-build option.”

The Romania car dealership on Franklin plans to move after 43 years and the land will be “drastically changed” by redevelopment in the next three to five years, said Sheila Moore of the property’s owner, CCJS Holdings of Lake Oswego. But nodal requirements will cost her company money, Moore said. “Our rights as property owners are being violated with this nodal.”

### Nodal Melt Down

The slap of heavy opposition to nodal development appeared to leave councilors and city staff dazed. The south Eugene and university areas with high concentrations of progressive supporters of good planning and bus and bike commuters should have been some of the easier areas to implement nodal development.

City Planning and Development Director Tom Coyle admitted the overlay regulations were “not working” for redevelopment sites like 29th and Willamette and were “precluding redevelopment” of the shopping center.

The Eugene Planning Commission recommended that the city revise nodal regulations to dramatically reduce or eliminate density requirements, add flexible standards and exempt residential areas from many of the regulations. In a memo, the commission said some resi-

dential rules were “impractical and unworkable” and others were due to a “drafting error” in the code.

In an unusual vote, council conservatives opposed to almost any nodal development and council progressives who favored tougher standards joined to vote against following the Planning Commission recommendation.

The “melt down” vote left the city with no clear direction on one of its most important planning issues, said Councilor David Kelly in an interview. “The question is how do we move forward?”

“I was absolutely shocked,” said Eugene planning manager Jan Childs. After the meeting, Childs said “perplexed” planning commissioners stood outside asking each other, “What happened?”

But councilors returned to the issue May 12 after hearing the Walnut node testimony and voted unanimously to send the nodal regulations back to the Planning Commission for changes. Councilors also voted 7-1 to cut most of the residential neighborhood out of the Walnut node and voted 5-4 (with mayor Jim Torrey breaking the tie) to exclude Willamette and 29th from nodal development at this time.

The votes were a major retreat from nodal development, throwing the entire planning approach into question. One of the city’s most promising nodes was eliminated, another reduced dramatically in size. Strict regulations requiring increased density were scheduled to be scrapped.

### Nodal No No

But gutting nodal development won’t be easy for Eugene.

“We’re not doing nodal just because it’s a fad,” Councilor David Kelly pointed out in an interview. “We promised the state we would do it when we adopted TransPlan.”

TransPlan is the Eugene/Springfield area’s state-required metropolitan transportation plan. The plan took 10 years, scores of meetings involving thousands of people and millions of dollars to write and agree to and was finally adopted in 2001. A key challenge for TransPlan was meeting the requirements of the state Transportation Planning Rule (TPR). As first written, the rule required the area to reduce average per capita driving by 10 percent over the next 20 years. The TPR was designed to reduce pollution, urban sprawl, road costs and traffic congestion, but Eugene and other city planners complained such a requirement was impossible. The state lowered the requirement to 5 percent. Still impossible, Eugene planners claimed. So, the state allowed cities to come up with their own alternative performance measures. A major component of Eugene’s alternative was nodal development.

By mixing residential, commercial and office uses in dense nodes served by transit and scattered throughout the area, Eugene/Springfield would decrease driving, the theory went. The state Department of Land Conservation and Development (DLCD) agreed to the nodal proposal but demanded that it have some measurable teeth. The cities agreed and promised in TransPlan that over the next 20 years they would zone a combined total of 2,000 acres for nodal development and locate 23 percent of all new homes and apartments and 45 percent of all new jobs in nodes. The cities agreed to designate and adopt zoning regulations for nodal sites by this September.

But its unclear if a majority of the Eugene City Council are now committed to complying with the nodal requirements in TransPlan.

Two new councilors elected with money from developer interests are balking.