

URBAN RENEWAL EXPANSION GETS NOD

The Eugene City Council voted Nov. 20 to move forward with a proposal to expand and continue the city's urban renewal districts. The effect of the vote will be to increase taxes and divert scarce school funding (see EW cover story, March 6).

The proposal, which will go to a public hearing in January, will expand the Riverfront Urban Renewal district by about 20 percent and renew it for another 20 years and continue the Downtown Urban Renewal District for 20 years.

Urban renewal is a complex method of creating a dedicated pot of money for development projects by manipulating taxes and diverting existing revenue for schools and other public services without a vote of the people.

Continuing the two urban renewal districts rather than eliminating them would effectively increase taxes roughly \$38 for the average homeowner and divert about \$2.8 million in other school and government tax revenue, according to city estimates. State school funding would lose about \$1.1 million a year, the city of Eugene \$1.1 million and Lane County about \$200,000.

The tax and diverted revenue impact of urban renewal will increase dramatically in later years as property values rise in the expanded districts. The city, however, hasn't developed estimates of the longer term impact.

Urban renewal has been controversial in Eugene for decades with critics blaming it for destroying the city's historic downtown to build concrete parking garages and wasting money on a road to nowhere in the UO Riverfront Research Park that threatens to develop a scenic natural area along the Willamette River.

The recent decision to use urban renewal to fund a long-delayed new library was far more popular, but expanding and continuing the districts would create far more money than is needed to pay off the library debt.

City staff and councilors have said using urban renewal to help fund a new \$33 million police station and adjacent parking garage cost-

ing millions more will be a top priority for the diverted money. The two districts now generate about \$4.1 million a year in taxes and diverted revenue. The police station has twice failed at the polls by a wide margin.

The council voted 6-2 to move forward with urban renewal. Councilor Betty Taylor complained that urban renewal money is spent "outside the public eye" and is too often wasted. She pointed to the millions of dollars spent on the railroad underpass at the Riverfront Research Park. "It's just a big waste of money sitting there, and that's the kind of thing that's easy to do with an urban renewal district."

— Alan Pittman



ROAD REPAIR BUCKS DIVERTED

The cities of Eugene and Springfield have complained for years now that they need higher taxes to fix a massive backlog of road repairs.

But the problem apparently isn't so great that they are willing to divert money planned to serve developers with new roads to instead fix potholes in old streets.

The regional Metropolitan Planning Committee (MPC), made up of officials from local government, voted down a proposal Oct. 9 to divert available money from new roads to fix the roads we already have.

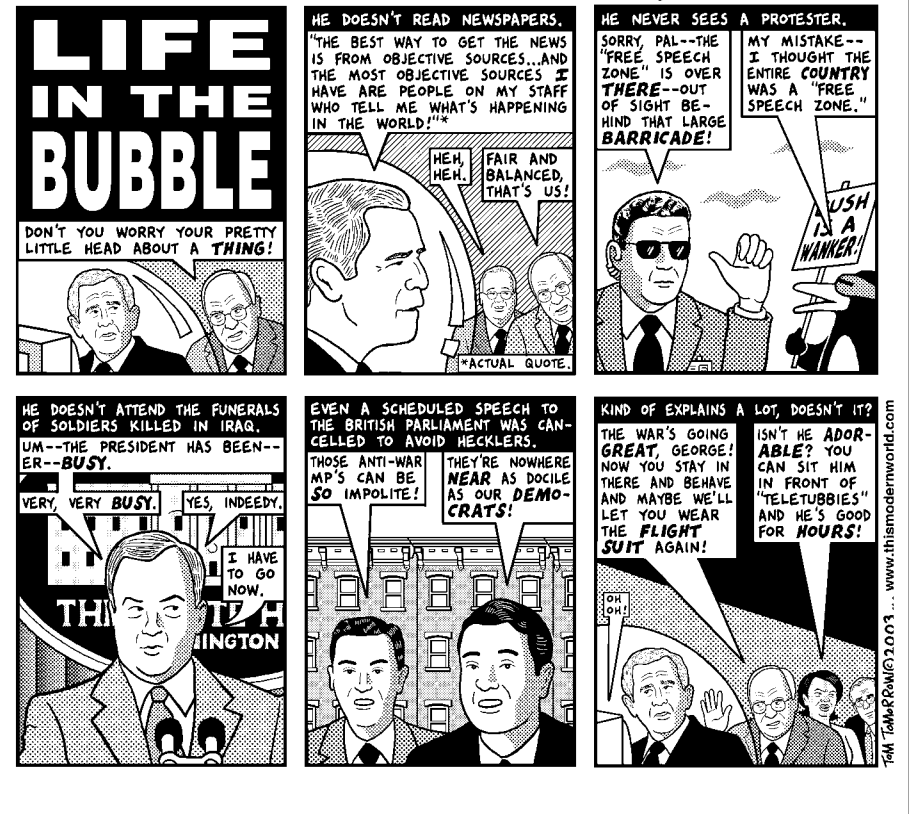
MPC member and Eugene City Councilor Bonny Bettman said in an interview that it makes no sense to spend money on new roads instead of maintaining the expensive roads the city already has. "Any available money we have to preserve the system should be spent to preserve the system."

Bettman had hoped to take about \$700,000 from a project to extend Chad Drive in north Eugene to serve *The Register-Guard* and big



THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW



bog stores in north Eugene and instead use the money to fix decaying streets in the city.

The city of Eugene now has an estimated backlog of \$94 million in road repairs. Timely repairs and maintenance of streets can save multiple millions of dollars in reconstruction work later if repairs are ignored, the city says. The city estimates that with the current lack of maintenance money, the repair backlog will

grow to \$231 million over the next decade.

The city of Eugene passed a road fee and a 3-cent gas tax to address the road repair problem last year. But the council recently repealed the road fee after progressives complained it was a

flat tax on homes, and businesses complained their share of the tax was too high. The gas tax brings in about \$2 million a year for Eugene.

Bettman says money for the Chad Drive extension should have come from fees charged to nearby developers who will benefit in higher property values because of the new road. "That's exactly the purpose for which system development charges were created."

The city now faces such a huge backlog in road maintenance because it has for years subsidized new roads for developers at the expense of maintenance of existing streets, says Bettman. "That's why we have a \$94 million backlog," Bettman says. "There's no discipline."

The Eugene City Council passed a resolution 6-2 in September to support the MPC redirecting money from new roads to preserving existing streets.

The resolution was opposed by Mayor Jim Torrey, who won election with record-breaking contributions from developers. Torrey said the new roads are needed to relieve congestion. "We can't just stop building new roads."

Bettman countered that the new roads were less about reducing traffic than serving speculators by accessing new lands for development.

At the MPC meeting, Torrey argued against money for road repairs, but then "as a courtesy" to the council resolution, voted with Bettman for an amendment to allow Eugene to divert new

road money to preservation. The motion failed 3-4. Torrey then voted for the main motion of new road spending without the amendment while Bettman voted against the package. — AP

RACISM & INJUSTICE

A facilitated town meeting on "Racism and Injustice: An examination of the effects of 9/11 on Muslims, Jews and Others" will take place at 7 pm Wednesday, Dec. 3 at Westmoreland Community Center, 1545 W. 22nd.

Discussions will center on discrimination, harassment, concerns about the role of the U.S. in the Middle East, and fear of speaking out. The meeting will be facilitated by Ibrahim Hamide, Sharon Emery, LMFT, Gary Reiss, LCSW, and Aura Salomon. The meeting is sponsored by the Eugene Middle East Peace Group.

\$48 MILLION EYED FOR ROAD TECHNOLOGY

Local road planners envision spending \$48 million over the next 20 years to install hundreds of traffic cameras, reader boards and remote controlled stop lights on major roads all over Eugene-Springfield.

In a draft plan, the planners claim the computerized Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) will save at least 10 times more money in expensive traffic congestion and accidents than it costs to build and operate.

In addition to the \$48 million in construction costs, the system will cost up to \$2.5 million a year to operate.

Planners have not identified a funding source, and the high-tech approach may have to compete for funding with the low-tech reality of millions of dollars of unrepaired potholes and cracks in existing streets. With cameras everywhere, the system could also draw fire from those opposed to big-brother surveillance.

ITS projects envisioned vary widely. Examples include: an automatic weather detection and deicing system on I-5 bridges; reader boards that warn of upcoming congestion or approaching trains at crossings; signs at bus stops that tell passengers exactly how long they have to wait; traffic lights that adjust their timing depending on traffic levels; lights on freeway ramps that space out merging cars and electronic bus passes. — AP

Happening people BY PAUL NEEVEL

MIKE BARNES

Since 1997, Cascadia Forest Goods has marketed wood products from Forest Stewardship Council-certified forests, as well as recycled and salvaged wood. "We sell products from forests that have been properly cared for, at close to market price—in some cases below market price," say CEO Mike Barnes. "Our Restoration Fir Flooring is wood from understory thinning." A Portland native, Barnes lived as a monk for eight years of high school and college at Mount Angel Seminary. Following two years of grad school in Seattle, he spent time with priests doing social justice work in Panama, Colombia and Mexico. On his return, he became a professional organizer, working for grassroots democracy in Chicago and other U.S. locales. "I returned to Portland in 1979," he says. "I was one of the founders of Oregon Fair Share." In 1993, Barnes was invited to direct the Ecoforestry Institute, a training center in southern Oregon. He started CFG there, then moved it to Eugene in '98, when his daughter reached school age. "We're busy now," he notes. "For the first time, we have a positive cash flow." Learn more about CFG at www.cascadiaforestgoods.com.

