

Grassroots Development

Citizen group brainstorms ideas to bring downtown up.

Despite tens of millions of dollars spent on parking garages and ripping out the pedestrian mall, downtown Eugene has never looked bleaker.

Ugly broken windows and graffiti line vacant buildings along Broadway where dozens of street kids often hang out. The long-empty buildings are owned by Tom Connor and Don Woolley, who last month announced they wouldn't follow through on plans for a \$165 million redevelopment project. The brickwork put in when the city ripped out the downtown pedestrian mall is now falling apart. Plans for a non-profit research center in a new green building across from the library fell through, leaving an ugly hole. Pedestrian traffic counts are only about a third of what they were 20 years ago.

But where developers and city planners have failed, a grassroots group is hoping to succeed with a community-based revitalization of the heart of Eugene.

Friends of Eugene (FoE) organized a community forum on downtown last month and drew about 50 participants who brainstormed ideas for three hours.

"Downtown is not dead," FoE President Kevin Matthews said. A number of projects ringing the downtown core including the new Tate and Aurora residential buildings, the federal courthouse, Whole Foods gro-

cery and plans to move EWEB's industrial operations and build a new City Hall, show promise, he said.

The flop of the Connor and Woolley redevelopment plan offers the opportunity for their many neglected and empty buildings to be sold and finally redeveloped with more community input and diverse ownership, Matthews said. "They've been sitting on quite a bit of real estate downtown, and that's been detrimental to the vitality of downtown."

encouraging owners to leave buildings vacant. A city fee to fund Downtown Eugene Incorporated, a downtown property owner group, is charged only on occupied space. Speculators with vacant buildings don't pay anything.

The grassroots group also had a bunch of other ideas:

- Make downtown greener with a restored millrace, green spaces, parks, community gardens, green corridor con-

downtown could provide more appropriately sized spaces and room for broad sidewalks for street cafes.

- Swap the hole in the ground across from the library for the Center Court building and tear it down to make a big plaza at Willamette and Broadway.

- Buy the butterfly lot from the county and convert it to a year-round Farmers' Market.

- Make the EWEB riverfront industrial property into a historical museum/plaza featuring the old steam plant.

- Create a shelter for the homeless, a community center that mixes youth and

'Downtown is not dead.'

— FoE PRESIDENT KEVIN MATTHEWS

No one at the meeting called for more parking garages downtown, the main focus of the city's failed redevelopment efforts over the past three decades. But there was no shortage of grassroots ideas for saving the heart of the city.

A popular idea was to push speculators like Connor & Woolley to rent or sell their vacant downtown buildings through regulation, condemnation or taxation. City Councilor Betty Taylor has said she would like the city to impose a tax on empty buildings downtown, which can be an eyesore and attract vandalism and loitering. City staff say some such tax would be legally possible.

Currently, city taxes do just the opposite,

necting downtown to the river, rooftop gardens, a playground, water fountains, play fountains, a waterfall in a greenhouse, rest rooms and other amenities. Such improvements could be financed with parking garage money and would help the city compete to attract new residents, businesses and tourism.

- The city manager system has left Eugene with a dead downtown for three decades and the system should be changed in favor of a more responsive and democratic form of government that's accountable for planning failures.

- Downtown lots are too deep for modern retailers. Restructuring the blocks

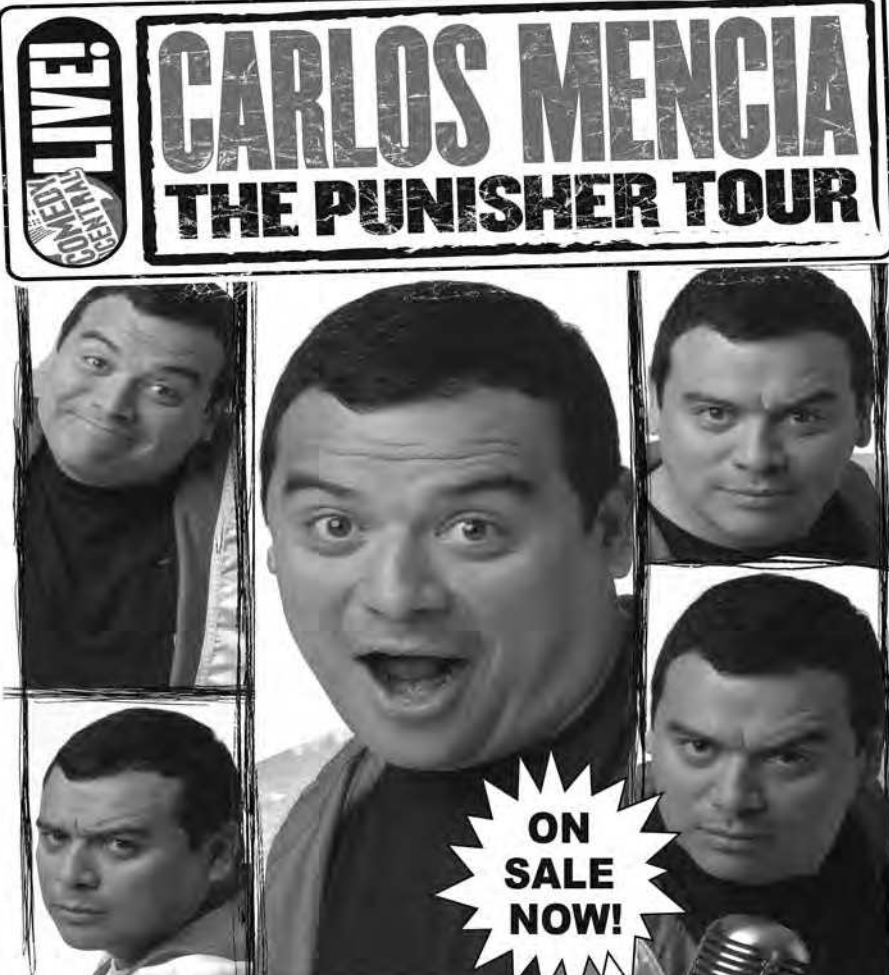
seniors, a co-op with affordable housing, a micro-enterprise business incubator, a free wi-fi computer network, and a center for non-profit environmental groups.

- Re-write the city's existing downtown plan to make it more of a plan and less of a list of vague policies and aspirations.

- Provide for alternative transportation with pedestrian-friendly streets, stairs up Skinner Butte, a downtown shuttle painted like Ken Kesey's psychedelic Further bus, more bike racks, a new pedestrian mall, and no more publicly financed parking garages.

- Restrict the building of more suburban chain and big box stores that destroyed downtown.

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