

Library Park II

Addressing concerns about a downtown park

Last week in this space, I advocated for a much-needed civic park across from our public library. I have been surprised by both the push-back the idea has received from the city's West Broadway Advisory Committee and the support the idea has received among the general public. Eugene has a great opportunity to get density and open space near the heart of downtown. If advocates for development want maximum support for public subsidies to private developers, they should be finding ways to support a park. After all, a park may be one area that average citizens can agree on as an appropriate use of public funds in the city of arts and outdoors. In this commentary, I want to address some key concerns that have been raised about the park proposal.



Why not create an elevated plaza? In his excellent study of urban open space in the U.S., William Whyte found that elevated or depressed plazas were generally not successful. They are less safe, less used, and less popular than at-grade parks. Imagine someone in a wheelchair trying to find an elevator to get up to an elevated plaza – they are difficult to access, disconnected from the life and security of the street and limit the potential for substantial landscaping. We have such an elevated plaza at the Eugene City Hall, and it is an underused urban space.

Parks will not be used in Eugene's wet winters. This is like saying residents of Eugene have no need for backyards since the winters make them unusable. Citizens of many other communities with winters much worse than ours make downtown parks work year-round. Nationally, Chicago, Boston, and New York have miserable winters but great urban parks. Regionally, Seattle, Olympia, Vancouver (Wash.), Portland, Beaverton and Ashland all have comparable winters and great urban parks. Why would Eugene be any different?

City code does not require open space. The code has many intricacies that address open space and density. The final determination will be made based on the project's design. For West Broadway, there are multiple scenarios that would lead to different requirements for open space. If the project has 45 or more residential units per acre or if ground floor areas were primarily dedicated to commercial uses, then it would be exempt from open space requirements. But these are assumptions that may not, in the end, be the case. With growing pressures for preservation of historic structures, the project may only get to 200 or 250 units and not meet the city's rather arbitrary density threshold.

Moreover, automatically assuming that all buildings will be mixed-use is premature. Vancouver (Wash.) and San Jose (Calif.) have beautiful new urban housing projects in the heart of their downtowns that go all the way to the ground along streets busier than ours. We should be open to alternative housing typologies at this early stage. If the project has parcels with urban housing to the ground and key historic buildings are preserved, then the open space requirement may indeed apply. In this case, for example, with 250 units at 1,200 sq. ft. each, the code may require 45,000 sq. ft. of open space, which is the size of the proposed Library Park. However, since the final design is months away, we cannot say that the project will or will not require open space. In any case, we should not get overly concerned about the current code, as it can be changed.

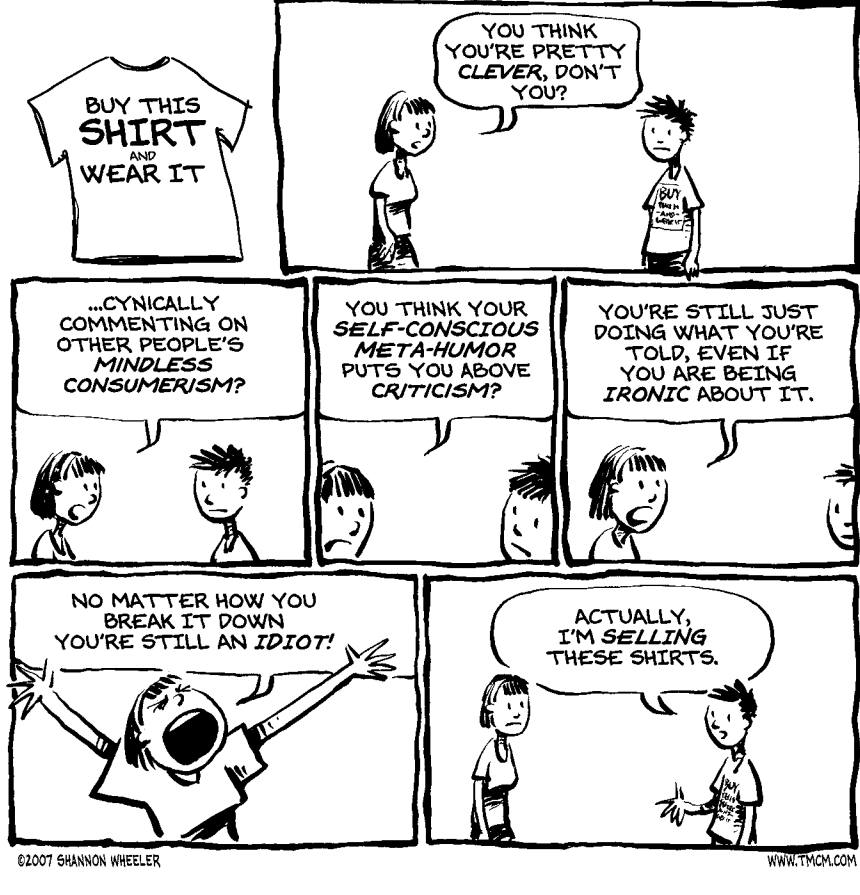
Parks and open spaces are suburban solutions, and we want an urban downtown. If this is true, then why do all great urban areas have parks in their centers as well as at their edges? A park is no more suburban than urban – it is a space for the public to use in countless ways. They can be built in the center of the city and in the suburbs. Relegating parks to the suburbs may be one reason why suburbs are more attractive for residential development than our downtown. Even KWG's February 2007 proposal for West Broadway recognized the value of urban open space – it shows roughly 45,000 sq. ft. of open space placed mostly in private courtyards above retail. Why not put this open space in a public park?

Regardless of any of these arguments, the voters may not look favorably on approving \$40 million or more in public subsidies to private development that only nets nice sidewalks, upscale retail and some additional housing. We can certainly do better.

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How to Be Happy

by Shannon Wheeler



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TEETH NEEDED

I would like to thank Alan Pittman for last week's article ("Downtown Decision", 8/30). Anyone who plans to vote on the \$40 million question this November owes it to Eugene to read his single-page outline of the present West Broadway redevelopment predicament. Combined with the articles appearing almost daily in *The Register-Guard*, it becomes clear that the advisory committee will either have to put some teeth into their proposal, or it will be back to the drawing board for the city in its redevelopment plans beginning the day after the election.

From all directions, I am hearing that we can fill the two holes downtown ASAP and renovate any number of big buildings without any more public funding than is already in the kitty. Further, urban renewal funding is not something that dries up if we don't spend it. The fact that one big developer after another keeps showing up tells us we're a popular place. No need to give our money away. If indeed we have \$40 million at our voting fingertips, it'll pay many times over to take our time about spending it to the best advantage of this fine, unique city of Eugene.

Scott Landfield
Eugene

NO Highbrows HERE

I was mildly annoyed to read Jim Earl's comments in the Aug. 16 issue of the *Weekly*. His comments about the "high-brow" tastes of intellectuals and the "repressed" nature of this group represent a surprisingly stereotyped and narrow view of people with "intellectual" careers. As a professor at the UO, I have plenty of colleagues who can appreciate both the beauty of a well-formulated theoretical model and the thrill of watching Aaron Brooks pull up and swish a basketball through a hoop from some ridiculously long distance.

Tom Robbins put it beautifully when he

wrote, "There are two kinds of people in this world; those who think there are two kinds of people and those who are smart enough to know better." Which kind of person are you?

Ed Awh
Associate Professor
Department of Psychology

PARK, PLEASE

Regarding proposals for use of the "space" across from the downtown library:

On the north side of downtown Colorado Springs is a large one-block park which used to be a major hangout for drug dealers. A few years ago, a private citizen paid to build the "Uncle Wilbur Fountain" in a corner of the park, with a comic figure at its center and variety of sprays and sprinklers with ever-changing flow patterns. It immediately became a place for children to play in the water and for adults to gather to enjoy the fun and open space.

With parents protecting the children and eager to report apparent drug dealing, the dealers and users faded away, and all the local businesses — bookstores, restaurants, gift shops, etc. — prospered.

Eugene would do well to do something similar with the space across from the library, and it would do more to improve downtown with a park than the usual feed-the-developers schemes that city manager governments always seem to generate.

Bill Christopher
and Melinda King
Eugene

DON'T SHUSH ME!

I've been seeing shows at the Cuthbert for years. Last Friday (8/24), I was with a group of 10 people who enthusiastically attended the Evening with Gordon Lightfoot show. Gordon was a true song stylist and put on a great show. However, all of my crowd was dismayed at the extreme low-level volume coming from the stage.

As if that weren't bad enough, we were