

# Park or Parking Garage?

Downtown committee requires little for big subsidy

**W**ill the city offer citizens any reason to vote for a huge urban renewal subsidy for a downtown developer?

It's beginning to look increasingly unlikely. A West Broadway Advisory Committee stacked with supporters of Portland developer KWG recommended Sept. 5 that the city require little of the developer in exchange for about \$50 million in subsidies.

Absent from the committee recommendation was a strong call for a new downtown park, real limits on the expensive parking garages KWG demands, limits on subsidizing corporate chains against local businesses or much else in the way of actual requirements in exchange for the massive public subsidy.

If the City Council goes along with the committee's recommendation to require nearly nothing in exchange for the taxpayer millions, it "will most likely doom the success of the necessary funding measure on this November's ballot," wrote Rob Handy. Handy, one of the few KWG skeptics the council appointed to the committee, represented Citizens for Public Accountability (CPA) on the panel.

Already, opponents have formed a PAC, Taxpayers for Sensible Downtown Development, to oppose the urban renewal subsidy, Measure 20-134. The group includes most of south Eugene's elected officials, members of CPA and a variety of local businesses including Sundance, The Kiva, Paul's Bikes, Sandpiper, the Tango Center and Tsunami Books.

A PAC brochure distributed at the Eugene Celebration asks, "Should Eugene amend the Downtown Urban Renewal Plan to increase the debt limit by \$40 million and give that money to private developers to build corporate retail and grocery chains and subsidized parking — transferring your tax dollars away from education, public safety, human services and roads? NO!"

The group suggests a more "sensible alternative." The Taxpayers PAC said the city should instead pursue an existing T.K. developer proposal for a 106-unit condo development and a Beam developer historic

rehabilitation of the Centre Court and Washburne buildings and Aster pit. The two projects wouldn't require the bigger urban renewal subsidy.

A proposal for a green city park on the half-block across from the downtown library has also drawn strong public support at city forums. UO architecture professor Mark Gillem proposed a park with trees, reading lawns, a playground, an interactive fountain and a street with parking that could be converted to market stalls.

Gillem said such a park would attract

and adding a fountain, playground and other amenities would cost more. For similar acreage, the city estimates that developing a neighborhood park costs about \$213,000.

Numerous state, federal and foundation grants are available to help build city parks. Citizens may also contribute much of the cost. Citizens raised \$5 million for the adjacent library building.

But Downtown Eugene Incorporated, the Chamber of Commerce and other conservative business interests that have long dominated downtown planning staunchly oppose public open space, arguing that it will only attract undesirables.

That anti-park view is a different approach than most successful cities. For example, New York, Portland, Ashland and

green space" was a key component of success for mixed-use redevelopment.

Parks are one of the most popular amenities in Eugene. Almost two thirds of voters supported the city's last two park bond measures.

As a compromise, the city could pursue a smaller park in the area. With the previous Connor/Woolley development proposal, local landscape architect Jerry Diethelm suggested a corner "pocket park" kitty corner to the bus station plaza with a fountain and seating.

Local architect Art Paz suggested a similar-sized elevated plaza above retail. But graphic designer Thomas Lincoln has criticized the elevated design as inaccessible and not contributing to street activity. Lincoln offered his own compromise 1/4 block design (see picture), but he said the committee refused to hear him speak.

The West Broadway committee called for a focus on "sidewalks as a primary public open space." It recommended only either a 1/8th block public plaza on the corner across from the library or just a wider sidewalk.

Although parks for people aren't popular with KWG boosters, parking for cars apparently is. KWG has demanded taxpayers pay for 700 parking spaces in underground garages for its development. Including loan interest, the spaces could cost taxpayers up to \$80,000 each.

It's unclear if KWG needs all the expensive parking spaces. The development is adjacent to the 729-car Broadway Place city garage, which is usually 80 percent empty. Within two blocks, three other half-empty garages combine to offer a total of 1,556 spaces. But KWG used formulas similar to those for suburban shopping malls to justify more parking. Despite the high cost, the Broadway committee didn't challenge the developer's calculations.

The committee challenged hardly anything KWG proposed, according to Handy. While KWG specified a guaranteed 13 percent profit for itself, the committee offered no "fiscal discipline" in protecting taxpayers pockets, Handy wrote.

"Overall, the committee recommendations are broad, weak or so vague that they are open to multiple interpretations," according to Handy. "We failed to address the concerns and values of the broader public, but instead adhered to the mantra, 'keep recommendations vague, don't upset the developer.'" **EW**



denser redevelopment on the remainder of the block, serve families going to the library and make downtown more livable and attractive for residents, shoppers and tourists.

The public cost of the half-block park would be far less than the subsidy KWG is demanding. The city already owns about three-fourths of the land and has an option to purchase the remaining piece (now a parking lot) for \$266,000. Last year, the city appraised the value of its land (including the Sears pit) at \$970,000 but offered to give it to a developer for only \$192,000.

Filling the hole, ripping up the pavement

Vancouver, Wash., all count downtown parks as one of their key attractions and contributors to development success.

The national Project for Public Spaces cites numerous examples of how urban parks bring a city together, boost business and property values, help the environment and revitalize areas. Cities commonly use design, increased use and patrols to curb undesirable activities, according to the group. Many cities have built ground-level parks on top of underground garages.

Economists at ECONorthwest reported to the committee July 17 that "community

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