

A Matter of Principle

Why I'm voting no on 20-134

The controversy swirling around the Eugene development department's downtown urban renewal district scheme has centered on two issues: 1) the appropriateness of spending tens of millions on an approach that differs little from the strategy that has damaged downtown Eugene so profoundly during the 40 years of the downtown urban renewal district's existence; and 2) a public process that ignores all of the big issues but is, nevertheless, toothless with respect to the small issues. The ethical and aesthetic issues, however, are still larger.



Don't be so distracted by the hard sell that you don't notice who really benefits and what's in it for us, the ordinary citizens: higher rents, higher taxes, more bland chain box stores, more empty parking structures and less of what makes Eugene interesting, unique and authentic.

Urban renewal diverts money from every ordinary public service. Have we reached the point where providing downtown shopping is a higher public purpose than education, street maintenance, affordable housing and social services? For example, nothing in this process guarantees that the housing we subsidize will be affordable housing. Should Eugene taxpayers promote above-market housing to attract the richer, more desirable new residents that developers prefer to the current citizenry?

What kind of partnership is it when the public is required to "invest" \$40 million or more in the project and does not share in profits, but must guarantee the developers a 13 percent return?. Clearly, our city manager form of government has given us a bureaucracy that is unaccountable. We paid 46 percent of project costs of the very disappointing Broadway Plaza. Did we get our money's worth? Apparently the lesson the development bureaucracy learned is to do it again at four times the scale.

Should we poke our local merchants in the eye with a sharp stick by privileging corporate box stores? Study after study has shown that national chains produce fewer and poorer jobs than the jobs they destroy by undermining local businesses. Are we going to have two classes of citizenship for businesses – with our local merchants, who have been here for years paying taxes, the only passengers going economy class?

Are there bigger issues than shopping? Shame on us if we endorse the city's plan to misuse CDBG Brownfield grants. Brownfield grants are meant to remedy "real property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance or pollutant." Redirecting this money to subsidize downtown shopping is an absurd abuse of this program that ought to be dedicated to addressing the real pollution problems in the Trainsong neighborhood.

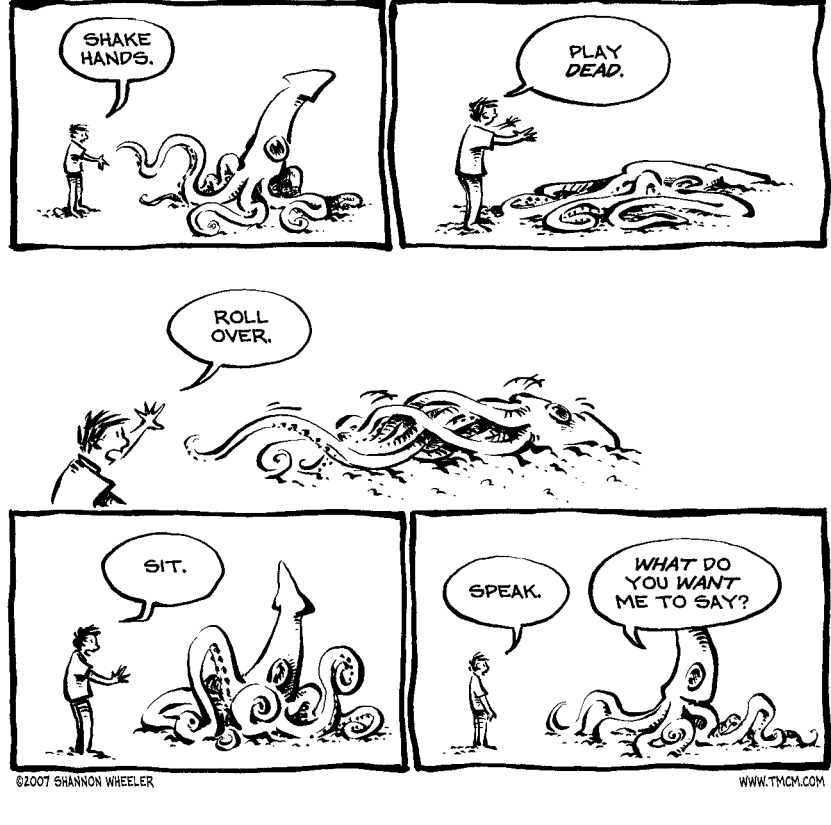
Our downtown bureaucrats have destroyed the historic center of Eugene. Now, after squandering \$100 million obliterating most of our architectural heritage, the city should not spend another \$50 million or more to tear down the few remaining historic buildings and to replace our 1960s architecture with equally undistinguished multi-use architecture. West Eugene historic neighborhoods will be their next target.

The developers figure that 1) after five years, we will always have forgotten the last fiasco, and 2) if they throw enough dust in the air we will believe that we will get something new and interesting for free. You can put lipstick on that pig, but it is still a pig.

In truth, we will not get the downtown paradise that we are being promised but just another boring cookie cutter commercial development, half- full of second tier box stores, paid for with our taxes. We can have a plan, we can do it better and we can do it in a more principled and ethical manner.

Paul Nicholson is a Eugene business owner and former city councilor.

How to Be Happy (7 of 8) by Shannon Wheeler



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TWO-FOR-ONE DEAL

As the city considers subsidizing development downtown, it might be wise to consider those who are already subsidizing the quality of life in this city: the underpaid employees of the nonprofit organizations that look after the emotionally ill, the developmentally delayed, the abused or neglected children, the homeless and others struggling on the fringes of our economy. These nonprofits have benefited over the years from a ready source of well-educated and committed young college graduates who could afford to work for low wages and wished to stay in a city they loved.

The high rents and increased burden of college loan payments are shrinking this pool of talent, and often workers move on quickly, which means the agencies experience high turnover instead of experienced employees. Additionally, as more and more retirees settle here, the need for lower paid hospital and nursing home staff will increase.

It would be to our city's advantage to provide low-income housing downtown for this largely younger workforce. They are the people who will patronize the kind of businesses we say we want downtown. We could have a two-for-one deal: higher quality caregiving and patrons for restaurants and nightlife.

*August Sabini
Eugene*

IT WON'T HURT SCHOOLS

By using a statewide figure to make a point about the relationship between education and urban renewal, your cover story on Measure 20-134 may have given your readers a mistaken impression. I am writing to correct that.

You state that the urban renewal district will divert \$28 million from school funding statewide. However, the local number is far smaller: \$17,000 this year under the district now in effect. While that number may grow as investment in the urban renewal district grows, we must also take into account that the urban renewal district will employ more people, generating new income taxes that are the principal source of education funding today.

In fact, the urban renewal district may ac-

tually help generate more funding for schools in cases like Eugene where voters have approved local property tax levies. That's because taxes generated in urban renewal districts don't apply toward the constitutionally imposed limit on property tax funding for education.

I'm a passionate advocate for schools, volunteering countless hours along with my colleagues to our educational mission, and yet I can't tell voters that all tax dollars should flow to schools. We also need a vibrant downtown, quality health care, affordable housing, good streets, mass transit and parks — all necessary for a livable community.

We are so fortunate to have a community that values its schools, but that doesn't need to come at the expense of other important values. Schools are part of the fabric of a community. Right now our community fabric is torn in the center. What better way to fix it than to use taxes generated by investment in the district itself — investment that likely would not have happened if the district didn't exist?

Individually, members of the Eugene School District board have endorsed Measure 20-134, because we think it's the right thing for our community. Mayor Kitty Piercy was a devoted educator herself. She has also endorsed Measure 20-134. I trust your readers to understand that if Measure 20-134 hurt schools, none of us would support it. Yet we do.

*Beth Gerot
Vice Chair, Eugene School Board*

DEAL-KILLERS

A 13 percent profit guarantee? Portland developers are demanding that the city of Eugene pay exorbitant prices for downtown property and then resell it to them for pennies on the dollar to guarantee their standard 13 percent profit. Absurd. Every businessperson reading this should march down to City Hall and demand a 13 percent profit for fiscal 2007. If they refuse to sign you up for the giveaway, then refuse to give them their play money.

Another Measure 20-134 deal-killer is that \$10 million of the \$40 million will be spent on administrative expenses: salaries, benefits,

Thank you, Eugene!
FOR YOUR ENCOURAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

"...live venturously, plucking the wild goat by the beard, and trembling over precipices..."
-Virginia Woolf

FROM THE GOAT HERD AT WANDERING GOAT COFFEE
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