

# Lessons from Corvallis

For both sides of the downtown debate

Imagine a college town where a new riverfront park, on the downtown side of the Willamette River, anchors a revitalized industrial area and nearby historic buildings house thriving local businesses. On a recent visit to this wonderful town, about a dozen volunteers from a local church were busy tending the colorful array of plants in the park. The adjacent Farmers' Market was just concluding, and by all signs it was a successful day in Corvallis.



While residents of Eugene have been debating downtown development, Corvallis has been developing its downtown. Its riverfront park and elegant historic buildings draw life to the downtown. A charming City Hall and popular library face another beautiful downtown park. Corvallis has an amazing six acres of parks in the heart of downtown in addition to over 150 acres of parks at the edge of downtown.

During the debate in Eugene over a ballot measure that would increase the spending limit of the downtown urban renewal area by \$40 million, many people have cited Corvallis as a model. The supporters of the measure, for example, used images of downtown Corvallis to make their point. But Corvallis did not happen because of public subsidies to private development. It happened because of a larger community vision that stressed open space over national chains and historic preservation over urban "renewal." On the other hand, opponents of the measure harp about the cost of public subsidies for downtown, which is exactly what built Corvallis' \$13.7 million riverfront park. While diehard Ducks may not want to hear this, Corvallis offers lessons for both sides of the debate.

Supporters and opponents of the ballot measure generally agree on many overarching goals for downtown: the need for more housing, enhanced open spaces and improved streets and sidewalks. We can build on this common ground regardless of the outcome of the vote on Tuesday.

The upcoming vote will give us an indication of which method Eugene will use to meet these goals. If the ballot measure passes, the direction will be to invest heavily in support of one private development. This would follow the Eugene preference for the big solution. Urban renewal, the downtown pedestrian mall and the unbuilt Whole Foods project are examples of looking for the silver bullet. If the ballot measure fails, Eugene will continue on a protracted path towards incremental change. We do know that downtown is experiencing a renaissance of sorts, with several new businesses opening along Broadway in the last year without any public subsidies. But housing is slow to follow retail, and the pace of change may not be quick enough for many in our community faced with the challenges of living and working downtown.

If the measure passes, then we need to ensure that housing and open space are primary components of the project. The developers should follow the council desire for a minimum number of housing units and, if possible, add more than the minimum. Reconstruction of sidewalks and streets should follow the recommendations of the West Broadway Advisory Committee. The proposed public open space across from the library should be more than another 1/8-block plaza — that is the last thing needed downtown. We have plenty of underused concrete plazas. Rather, the developers should build the larger open space recommended by Councilor Zelenka as a green public park. At one-half acre, this small park could be a start for something better for our downtown. Corvallis' downtown riverfront park and Cottage Grove's plan for a 14-acre downtown park are models that we can eventually follow.

If the measure fails, we need to develop quickly a compelling vision for downtown that meets the common goals. Housing and historic preservation should be the focus rather than large-scale retail. Real parks rather than more parking garages should be the recipients of public subsidies. The measure's opponents should realize that the public will still need to invest in downtown development — through an expanded urban renewal district, additional bonds or other subsidies. After all, the public already invests in sprawl through its funding of roads, parks, and infrastructure at the edge of town. This investment downtown would yield financial, environmental and social returns far into the future.

If the measure passes, opponents should graciously acknowledge the will of the voters and work towards the solutions supported by the majority. If the measure fails, supporters should not throw up their hands in despair — rather they should refocus their efforts on the goals for historic preservation, housing, and open space.

Like our neighbors in Corvallis, we too can have a more vibrant downtown with thriving shops and cafes, additional urban housing and ample parks. Whether we end up with the big solution or incremental growth, our downtown will change. We just need to make sure those changes meet our common goals.

*Mark L. Gillem is an assistant professor in the departments of Architecture and Landscape Architecture at the UO.*

And please don't be fooled by the claim that the language of the West Broadway Advisory Committee recommendations has been strengthened to tell the developers what they "shall do."

Customizing a developer's formula plan will cost us. If 20-134 passes and the developers come back and say, "Yeah, sure, we will do what the advisory committee recommends, but it will cost an additional \$20, \$30 or \$40 million," would you support that?

If voters fall for all of the deception coming the proponents of 20-134, then I have a bridge for sale.

*Lisa Warnes  
Eugene*

## NO SET PRICE TAG

To buy "a pig in a poke" is to pay for something you can't see. That about sums up what we're being asked to do with Measure 20-134. Except that even the price tag is under wraps.

Thanks for Betty Taylor's column and Alan Pittman's excellent summary and explanation (10/18). I had been wondering what I was missing, having listened to the two radio debates and read a lot of material and still feeling in the dark. Now Pittman explains the project "has no set price tag and no set description and relies on [a] ... financing scheme so complex only a few tax experts really understand it."

But it's clear \$40,000,000 is just the proposed increase in expenditures. The full cost is at least \$69 million (Voters Pamphlet, p. 32) — with \$10 million for administration. A "rebuttal" from backers (Pamphlet, p. 33) doesn't even try to rebut the point that revenue to 4J, Lane ESD, LCC, the city and the county would be reduced by \$86,940,000 over the next 23 years.

We've never been asked what we want for downtown without preconditions. Instead, a complex and hugely expensive plan is the starting point. Further "recommendations" are now being used to sell the plan, but they are not binding. Some people are desperate to "do something" about downtown. But spending \$69 million on 5.2 of the 70 acres downtown to get a few hundred housing units when we need 6,000 to form a critical mass won't provide the density essential to real improvement. And much cheaper and more promising alternatives are available (e.g., Betty Taylor, "Risky Business: the case for smaller-scale redevelopment," *EW*, 10/18.)

The setup is to make us vote without knowing what will really be done with all that money — however much it turns out to be. Let's wait till the smokescreen clears. Vote No on 20-134.

*Robert Roth  
Eugene*

## HARSH & CRUEL

I was saddened by Chuck Adams' unkind review (10/18) of the Springfield Mayor's Art Show. It isn't that I necessarily disagree so much, but I am curious why he put so much energy into being so very harsh and cruel. I can't help but think that it has much more to do with what is going on in his life than the Springfield Mayor's Art Show.

To borrow some of Chuck's words, it doesn't take much in the way of psychological depth, life or vitality to write a view that aims so low.

*Tom Gettys  
Eugene*

## ENDING CORRUPTION

Alisa McLaughlin almost got it right in her Oct. 4 letter to the editor. She wrote, "Our votes are too valuable to give away, so I suggest, like the people we elected, you sell your vote to the highest bidder."

McLaughlin should advocate democracy instead. Under a democracy, special interests would have no influence because their bribes would be spread too thin to make a difference.

We need a statewide initiative that allows voters to vote directly on a bill or lend their votes to a fulltime representative in Salem. This initiative will give power to voters who refuse to vote for corrupt politicians.

*T. Poulsen  
Eugene*

## TIME FOR TEARS

I know it's election time and I should be writing on why I support Measures 49 and 50, but I must tell you why I'm shedding tears thinking of our friend Lucy Lahr, who was hit by a truck and dragged and killed. She was a friend to our community, where she worked for human justice and a fairer treatment of those going through difficult times. There was always a smile on her face and sparkling eyes as she greeted you, making you feel welcome.

Winter rains are here, and too many are driving too fast, not putting on their headlights soon enough and not watching for pedestrians. I see bikes at night with no lights or only with only dim spots and no reflectors. Maybe we all need to find white umbrellas and at least wear a little white at night. The rain makes it very difficult for me to see at night. Let us all remember the great loss of Lucy Lahr, so young and with so much to offer our community, and be more considerate when we drive our streets. We can't afford to lose another Lucy Lahr.

*Ruth Duemler  
Eugene*

## OUR BEST TOOL?

I listened to the "Sunday at Noon" (KLCC 10/14) call-in program hosting Sara Gelser (co-author of Measure 50) with great frustration. I didn't realize that this measure funds private insurance companies! As many of us know, most insurance companies are able to provide tiered health insurance. Depending on your choice of premiums, you are able to purchase your access, or reduced access, to health care — emphasis on "purchase" to draw attention to the fact that health care in this country is a business. There is no mention of restrictions on these insurance companies to provide health care premiums at a reasonable cost.

The analyst on the program mentions that within two years premiums will most likely cost the purchaser \$160 per month. I don't know any impoverished families that are capable of paying premiums of this amount. One of the comments Gelser made is that "This is the best tool we have to get kids health care." I disagree. We already have a health care system in place (Oregon Health Plan) that has miserably failed to provide health care to these children. Why isn't the money being spent on this measure being funneled into this system to improve access and coverage? Gelser mentions that we have significant problems with enrolling children into this program. Why is that? Bureaucracy does not improve by funding another program and certainly not one that changes the constitution.

What about improving access to the Oregon Health Plan, less restrictions, less red