

PAVING PARADISE

Courthouse Garden running out of time

The lush and productive Courthouse Garden east of the U.S. Courthouse in Eugene has garnered national attention as an innovative collaboration between the city of Eugene, the University of Oregon, local businesses and the judicial system, but it may get bulldozed and paved over if a local credit union or another private business buys the 1.9 acres of city-owned property.

The three-year agreement that allows the UO to use the land free for a garden expires in February and “there have been no other offers to purchase the property since it was acquired,” says Denny Braud of the city’s Planning and Development Department. “We look forward to assisting the university with its future garden plans as it transitions from the space.” Braud doesn’t anticipate any extensions of the agreement.

The Courthouse Garden, inspired by U.S. District Judge Ann Aiken, was always intended to be a temporary use of the land, but it has evolved to become a “unique civic asset,” says Ann Bettman, co-founder of the garden and former director of the UO Urban Farm. She says the Courthouse Garden grows 6,000 pounds of food each year to feed Lane County’s homeless and hungry, and serves as a center for urban agriculture and landscape architecture education for UO students, at-risk youth groups and more.

Northwest Community Credit Union (NCCU) is pursuing purchase of the property and the Eugene City Council will be looking at the proposal in a noon work session Wednesday, Oct. 31, just after *EW* goes to press. Earlier this week the sales price was still under negotiation, along with any tax breaks or system development charge waivers that the credit union is requesting or the city is offering. The property is not within any state enterprise zone, but is targeted for development within Eugene’s controversial Urban Renewal District.

City Councilor Betty Taylor says the pending sale and likely subsidies are significant enough to warrant a public hearing, but City Manager Jon Ruiz tells her a hearing “is not necessary and that they (NCCU) are in a hurry. It would take a council majority to require a hearing.” Taylor says she was surprised to see the agenda item pop up with less than a day’s notice. “If I had plans for this evening [Tuesday] and my usual Wednesday morning commitment, I might not have known anything about the agenda item before Wednesday’s meeting.”

UO landscape architecture instructors who have taught at the site say the current location has many advantages. They like that the site is halfway between the campus and downtown, and that it’s very visible and accessible.

High school students and their teachers, along with various groups working with at-risk teenagers, have taken advantage of the Courthouse Garden for learning about urban agriculture and picking up gardening skills that they can use throughout their lives.

Another benefit of the site is the looming presence of the U.S. Courthouse, which discourages theft and vandalism. The Courthouse was described by one teacher as a “big scarecrow.” From the garden, it’s impossible to know who might be looking down, or what cameras might be pointed at the garden.

One of the people drawn to the garden was Jeffrey Lurers, an environmental activist and former prison inmate. He is now a graduate student in landscape architecture at UO and spends a lot of time at the garden. “The Courthouse Garden is a unique opportunity for the UO to have a positive impact on social justice and food security issues in Eugene,” he says, “and for the UO to give something to the community other than another sports arena.”

Can the garden be relocated? Bettman says “It’s not reasonable to just scoop it up and move it. You destroy it and build another one.”

One of Bettman’s frustrations is that she hasn’t seen another site that works as well. One site that has been mentioned is a city-owned strip of concrete-covered land between the railroad tracks and Franklin Boulevard, just west of Louie’s Village Restaurant. Bettman says the site is too long, narrow and too noisy for teaching and she’s concerned about railway spraying of herbicides. Dealing with the concrete is another issue and expense, along with fencing.

Is there room for both a credit union and a garden on the current site, or perhaps some greenspace to help connect downtown to the river? “It would be interesting to know,” Bettman says. “There’s new thinking about the UO’s take on the Riverfront Research Park, the possibility of EWEB redevelopment going through, the 8th Avenue Great Street, and that site is really just in the hinge of all those things. It’s critically located. It seems to me that if we could take a longer view of things, and maybe find a better site for the credit union, we would have a chance to do something a little more exciting on that site.”

The site also includes the old office building for Agripac, which local historian Jon Pincus describes as “one of the last intact remnants of Eugene’s early industrial base.” He says it is a “highly significant historic site ... and any architect or developer with creativity should be able to accommodate that but as you know creativity, when it comes to integrating historic properties into development, seems to be in short supply in Eugene.” ■

For earlier stories, search for “Courthouse Garden” at eugeneweekly.com



PHOTO BY TED TAYLOR

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photo by Terraculture

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