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VIEWPOINT BY ANITA JOHNSON

Garden Rush Job

ARE WE GETTING FULL VALUE FOR THE
COURTHOUSE GARDEN SITE?

It seems that Eugene city government, both appointed and some elected, wants to seal a deal on the Courthouse Garden site (triangle site) before the general public knows what we're losing. The agenda item selling the nearly two-acre site for \$1.23 million plus many perks was so rushed that EW knew about it before at least one councilor. Clearly, the city wants to avoid a classic Eugene uproar.

This is so ironic because the Courthouse Garden, which this sale will destroy, was one of the most inclusive and collaborative projects, across economic, social, political lines, in recent Eugene history.

A little background: U. S. District Judge Ann Aiken is known nationally for her efforts to assist federal prisoners re-entering society to lead productive lives. Out the windows of the nationally recognized new U.S. Courthouse she saw a disgraceful trash heap covering nearly two acres owned by the city of Eugene.

So, why not put released prisoners to work cleaning it up, planting a beautiful vegetable garden to help feed Eugene's growing hungry population? A win-win!

The concept appealed to Ann Bettman, just retired after 30 years directing the UO Landscape Architecture Department's Urban Farm, and her partner, Dan Dingfield, recently transplanted to Eugene from Seattle where he had been project director of the Port of Seattle and an early organizer for the famous Seattle Public Library.

Judge Aiken wondered if the garden could be growing and on display in six months, in time for a national meeting of federal clerks in Eugene. Miraculously, it was, starting with leaves dumped from city trucks, under the direction of Bettman and Dingfield, volunteering their professional time.

More than 25 local businesses signed on: Lane Forest Products, Staton companies, Delta Sand and Gravel, Eugene Sand and Gravel, Log House Plants, Papé Machinery, Bagel Sphere, Black Sheep Gathering, Eden Design & Landscaping, Fall Creek Nursery, Global Delights, Healing Harvest, Imagine Graphics, Island Fence, Rain Bird, Rexus, Reynolds Electric, School Garden Project of Lane County, Starbucks, Stutzman Environmental Products, Territorial Seed, the Jerry Brown Co., United Pipe and many more. The city signed a three-year memorandum of understanding with the UO, bringing in the School of Architecture and Allied Arts, the Department of Landscape Architecture, the Holden Leadership Center and UO Maintenance, donors of compost. EWEB was a big player, plus the Lane County Sheriff's Office. Individuals and the David Minor Memorial Fund gave money.

Because the imposing U.S. Courthouse is a "scarecrow," no fencing is needed. Almost nothing has been destroyed or stolen. Strangers harvest some berries, tomatoes, but that's OK. It's totally accessible to the owners, the people of Eugene.

This summer and early fall, nearly three years later, 6,000 pounds of food went to the Eugene Mission, the Relief Nursery and other charities. UO landscape architecture students learn food gardening skills and tend the garden. One student wrote a paper describing his garden class, where he worked alongside released prisoners and their parole officers, as one of his most significant UO classes. This fall the UO catering program rolled in a reception opening the year for landscape architecture. Other classes across the UO have met there. At-risk Eugene youth have worked the rows.

A fine video of Eugene's Courthouse Garden produced for free, has been shown at federal court conferences across the country. Some jurisdictions have copied the concept. The city of Eugene even gave itself an award for the garden at the annual State of the City Address.

The city's present deal for this site is a three- or four-story commercial building with some underground but mostly surface parking. A city official told us that "this site is too important to be a garden or a park ... it should be a commercial site." Really! Even if we accept that position, and we don't, this decision raises so many questions and opportunities for the public good.

What about saving some space as part of a route to the river from downtown Eugene? What about garden and building sharing the site? What happens to the historic Agripac cannery headquarters? Is there another viable city-owned site for a "courthouse garden" built on this concept? Has anybody talked to the new UO president, a criminologist, about his interest in the garden?

What if a private group offered to pay \$2 million for the site? One developer told us \$1.23 million is "a steal." Is our city government truly taking the long view for the people of this city? ■