

Visioning without Guts

CITY SUFFERS FROM AD HOC PLANNING

Recently the Eugene City Council was scheduled to act on a detailed rezoning ordinance for a large area of south Eugene. However, it raised the ire of local citizens because the issues it addressed had not been adequately presented to the people who would be most affected by its changes. The ordinances were justified as being in support of the Envision Eugene project and the South Willamette Concept Plan. In their notice of frequently asked questions (FAQs) the planners state that “the community will have opportunities ... to review and comment on the different drafts of the plan.” However, neither of these long-range plans have yet been adopted by the City Council, let alone presented to the community for discussion as completed documents. Of course, there have been workshops and planning meetings where the proposed contents of the plans were discussed. But, completed documents that actually form the bases for future action are still outstanding. However good the planning processes may be, those affected by the plans must see the resulting completed plans to understand their probable effect.

Without completed plans to support them, the proposed changes in zoning designations and design standards for the South Willamette Street area were pushed ahead, not even following the South Willamette Concept Plan and the Envision Eugene project. So much for long-term planning! The pushing of this project by the city manager is yet another example of ad hoc planning — in this case created by City Hall, but not by the City Council.

And even if the South Willamette Plan had been adequately discussed and actually adopted by the City Council, it would not support the adoption of the proposed rezoning and associated design standards at this time. In particular, the implementation section of the plan (Section 7) states:

“The implementation phase of the project will include additional processes and an opportunity for the community to provide input into the creation of the implementation tools.”

And: “Actions will generally be undertaken in the short, medium and long term. Short-term actions generally include: developing a new Single Family Options (SFO) zone.”

There has been no adoption of a new Single Family Option zone in the City Code.

Medium-term actions are those generally required for adoption of a Special Area Plan (SAP) for the district, including form-based or hybrid code and related design guidelines, plan designation changes, zone changes and amendments to the South Willamette Subarea Study enabling ordinances.

There is no Special Area Plan for the South Willamette Area, nor amendments to the South Willamette Subarea Study. The rezoning proposal, under the still-to-be-adopted South Willamette Concept Plan, must be considered a “medium-term action,” certainly not a “short-term action.”

Instead, the city manager has combined all these as-yet-to-be short- and longer-term projects into the proposed zoning actions by the City Council. And these ordinances are justified by long-range plans that, as of now, are yet to be adopted.

Rezoning is not the central thrust of the South Willamette Concept Plan, which still needs much attention before it is adopted. The fate of the centerpiece of the plan — South Willamette Street, one of the corridors identified in the Envision Eugene planning process — is not now being considered. Even the parts of the South Willamette Street Plan that have been adopted — the experimental, temporary restriping of traffic and bike lanes — have been postponed. Whatever the results of the experiment, the results are simply a “placeholder” in the Concept Plan. The implementation of the major issues of improving the character of the street has not been addressed at all, even as the proposed zoning ordinance attempts to do so. A street plan that addresses many

of the issues of the proposed ordinances is not scheduled to be studied until 2018 at the earliest.

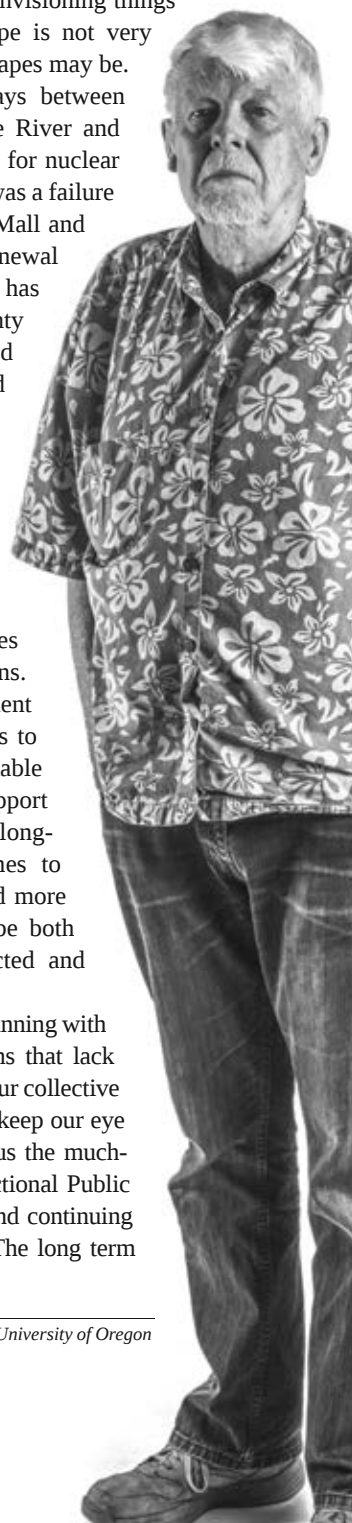
My point is: What is the use for long-term planning if ad hoc plans that do not address our visions are adopted while long-term goals are pushed aside? For too long Eugene has responded to short-term availability of funds, or short-term crises or political pressures of developers to lead the way in which the city changes — and to couple that with an inability to implement even the plans that the city itself controls. The result is a city that is constantly envisioning things but rarely accomplishing them. The urban landscape is not very attractive, even as several buildings and local streetscapes may be.

In the past, Eugene has seen plans for freeways between the university and downtown, along the Willamette River and Fairmont Boulevard and East 19th; it has seen plans for nuclear plants close to the city; it has seen an urban mall that was a failure almost from the start as it allowed the Valley River Mall and West 11th Avenue to grow; it has adopted an Urban Renewal District to create a research park, which in 30 years has not developed; it has allowed municipal and county functions to spread throughout the area; it has allowed the U.S. Courthouse to escape from downtown, and was unable to locate the hospital within the city. It has seen the vision of an 8th Avenue with Courthouse, City Hall and EWEB headquarters stumbled into a disorganized mess. It has seen the courthouse square lose its integrity with an ugly parking structure. Most of these constructions were accomplished without good long-term plans. They simply responded to short-term pressures and opportunities whether or not they fit in with realistic long-term visions.

I support a denser Eugene; I support the improvement of the South Willamette Street corridor with changes to adjacent residential areas. I also want a vibrant, walkable and bicycle friendly commercial district. And I support the efforts of city staff and the community to create long-term planning documents. However, when it comes to implementation and action to create a better city and more livable neighborhoods, the long-range plans must be both discussed by the citizens who will be most affected and implemented by the city in an orderly fashion.

Let’s not blow the chance for effective long-term planning with Envision Eugene and Special Area Plans with visions that lack guts. Especially, let’s not leave the implementation of our collective visions to immediate pressures. Instead, for a change, keep our eye on the long-term. Vision and long-term efforts gave us the much-used and admired Hult Center, the beautiful and functional Public Library and, finally, a revitalized downtown. Vision and continuing support have given us great parks and open spaces. The long term requires an informed community and lots of patience.

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