

THE CITY HALL VOID

Where, oh where has our City Hall gone? We ask ourselves that question as we pass the barren site daily. It stands there as the largest “kitty litter box” in the world.

The most symbolic project for our city in 50 years has received little or no public input, display or conversation. So what’s the problem? The current version shown is certainly not radical or particularly imaginative.

We see the same perspective rendering over and over and hear that if we make the building more seismically resistant it will extend the time to occupancy an additional year and cost more. Experience says it would take no more than a month to revise any structural engineering to the higher “essential” seismic status. And based on what we know, the building does not house any function that could be classified as “essential” for seismic purposes anyway.

The delay suggests that something else is happening under the covers.

We also note the curious proposal to eliminate any office space for city councilors and the provision that the open council space provided be segregated from the mayor and the manager. Doesn’t this organization send just the wrong message to its citizens? And furthermore, it physically “builds-in” the manager-council

form of government because it would then require a substantial interior renovation to change the layout to a mayor and councilor form of government, probably a better fit now for a city of this size.

Are there any answers out there and does anyone care?

Otto P. Poticha, FAIA
Eugene

GET ON WITH IT

Round about the time we were carving November’s tofu turkey, Marco Rubio said, “We need more welders, less philosophers.” (We won’t belabor his diction herein.) Had Marco received and embraced a better education he might have opined, “We need more welders who are philosophers; more philosophers who are welders.” Where did he learn that you can’t be both at the same time? Not in my classroom, I hope.

I applaud *EW* for its “Our Kids Deserve Better” lead story in the annual Education issue Feb. 25. Some good stuff. A cautionary note: More time in a classroom isn’t necessarily more learning. Our *Little House on the Prairie* model is limiting. Kids are not cordwood. Sometimes the very best we can do is get the hell out of their way. Common Core? Forced algebra? Don’t get me started.

IP 28 is a cop-out, isn’t it? A necessary cop-out, maybe. But I tend to agree with the suits who tell me it’s regressive and a sales tax in disguise. So, let’s get on with it and commence with the sales tax.

An administrator and school board member, quoted in the piece, are pointedly said to “not take a stance on the initiative.” That’s a head scratcher. I recognize the problem, but I’m not willing to piss off the constituency? Get out there like Ian Paisley — damn the Molotov cocktails — and beat the drum.

Kids, pay attention. Understand that the Earth travels ’round the sun, and the moon ’round the Earth. And you have your sacred place in that orchestration, no matter what the standardized test tells you.

Dave Sheehan
Eugene

ACCESS IS DECLINING

I am a member of a large medical group in Eugene, and I am worried. In the past couple of years I have noticed that it is more and more difficult to see a doctor in a timely manner. Regardless of the urgency of the problem, the wait time can stretch from one month to three or more before getting an appointment. This is crazy.

The basic problem? There aren’t enough doctors and more people need

service, because we live longer. The cause of the problem? The high cost of medical school discourages young people from going in the first place. Those who incur debt choose fields that promise to pay the most so they can free themselves of debt. This situation leaves some specialties lacking sufficient practitioners. In the event of a real health emergency, we are forced to resort to emergency services, which are shorthanded, bringing us back to the underlying problem.

I no longer feel that if I need treatment it will be available. What to do? Can others offer ways to deal with this urgent problem? In the meantime, we will all have to make the best of a bad situation and hope that when we need a doctor, we can get the care we deserve.

Penny Jennings
Eugene

TRUE MONOPOLIES

Regarding the Feb. 18 letter about the monopoly status of attorneys, physicians and dentists. The number of phone book pages devoted to listings for those professions (79) indicates a great deal of competition, not monopoly status. The author may have confused the concept with licensure requirements, which exist at least in part to protect consumers in

VIEWPOINT BY PAUL NICHOLSON

Tool for Development?

URBAN RENEWAL IS THE PROBLEM, NOT THE SOLUTION

In the beginning, “downtown renewal” in Eugene was really about greasing the skids for the controversial Valley River shopping center. The development community embraced this “tool,” and a chorus of the optimistic and the self-interested promised an attractive, renewed downtown and a gigantic mall.

Every 10 years for the past 49 years, the Eugene City Council acting as the board of the Urban Renewal Agency declares downtown a blighted area and signs us up for another 10 years of urban renewal (UR). Next year will mark the 50th anniversary of downtown urban renewal.

I will argue that urban renewal has been a program that primarily benefits only real estate speculators; that UR has diminished, not enhanced our downtown; that the whole approach is rife with waste and nepotism; and that City Council and the mayor should honor their prior assurances that downtown urban renewal should now end.

Here’s how Eugene and many other cities were seduced by urban renewal:

The 1972 California innovation of tax increment financing (TIF) was the first of two major changes in the way UR could be implemented. TIF works by diverting taxes from the increase in taxable valuation of property in a tax increment district after the date of the creation of the district. UR districts were permitted to borrow money, subsidize development projects and repay the loans with diverted property taxes. UR was sort of a “pull yourself up by the boot straps” concept. In theory, the actions of the Urban Renewal Agency would enhance the value of downtown, which in turn would pay for further downtown improvements.

Around the same time, in the face of the failure of UR as an element of affordable housing policy, Congress enacted the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974. In short, the responsibility for administering UR was largely shifted to local city planners, who were given greater scope and encouraged to form public-private partnerships. UR became an opportunity for a mutually beneficial alliance between local developers and the ever-expanding city planner bureaucracy.

What’s wrong with investing some money to fix the downtown?

The problem is that, in 50 years, we have not fixed downtown. Essentially, taxing

the “incremental value” was really just a tax on inflation. The real dollar value of property in the downtown UR district is practically unchanged.

How we know that urban renewal has failed:

- Every 10 years, our own City Council declares downtown a blighted area — so, how can it be a success?

- The real dollar value of the downtown UR district has risen only 3 percent in 49 years, even though Eugene invested more UR funds than the entire \$126 million current taxable valuation of all the property in the downtown UR district! In short, our entire investment was lost.

- UR thwarted genuine investors and entrepreneurs who would have renewed downtown at no expense to the public. For example, the historic part of downtown north of 7th Avenue between Charnelton and High is not in the UR district. Yet, without benefit of UR subsidies, taxable valuation has increased by 284 percent. The Whiteaker neighborhood is also gaining value rapidly without UR subsidies.

- Most of our historic downtown buildings were torn down or ruined with UR subsidies.

- The UR program is grossly deficient in transparency and public involvement.

- Also, the city’s general fund has been tapped to subsidize UR projects. For example, since Jon Ruiz became city manager, the city of Eugene’s rent expenses have doubled, adding \$60,000 annually to the city’s rent expenses. And this is because Ruiz moved city offices into the UR projects, and agreed to pay rent even on the developer’s unrented empty space.

We cannot afford street maintenance unless the voters agree to pay extra. We cannot sustain library services unless taxpayers agree to pay extra, but we can always afford a subsidy for a downtown developer.

If council fails to honor its promises to end downtown urban renewal, it is time to take your pitchfork to the next City Council meeting — express your outrage!

Paul Nicholson is a former city councilor and is the longtime owner of Paul’s Bicycle Way of Life.