

NEWS

BY BEN RICKER

ONWARD CITY HALL

Years of deliberation, millions of tax dollars spent, and still nothing to show but a city block of gravel flats and an angry clutch of frustrated taxpayers: A sharply divided Eugene City Council agreed last week to pursue a costly plan (of as-of-yet dubious legal merit) to erect a shiny new City Hall building on a county-owned plot north of the Park Blocks downtown.

After bureaucratic wishful thinking, inadequate planning and opaque city management the City Hall saga has abraded the public trust, though incoming Mayor Lucy Vinis wants to restore faith in the project.

"We need to restore the sense that the city is being responsible with tax dollars," Vinis says.

Despite baby steps made Dec. 14 at the City Council meeting, City Hall still has major hurdles to clear, including a court ruling to determine whether a 160-year-old deed restriction will limit the city-county land transfer. Many wonder whether city leaders have the mettle to complete their quest to build an attractive and durable City Hall without millions more taxpayer dollars going to waste.

"My opinion is the same as everyone else's," says Emily Semple, the recently elected Ward 1 City Councilor. "It's been a fiasco."

City Manager Jon Ruiz revealed this past summer that

plans drawn up for City Hall by Rowell Brokaw Architects would exceed the approved budget by approximately \$10 million. The *Register-Guard* reported that Ruiz knew months in advance that the city was facing a hard financial pill to swallow, but for whatever reason decided to keep it under his hat until the last possible moment.

Once brought up to speed, city councilors got cold feet and began exploring a potential land swap involving the former City Hall site and the county's "butterfly" parking lot. The city even rekindled the popular riverfront EWEB City Hall idea for a short while.

'The history is, the public was never interested in paying for a new City Hall.'

— MAYOR-ELECT LUCY VINIS

"It's shaken my faith in the system," Semple says, adding that the floundering City Hall Project is partly what spurred her to run for office in the first place.

She calls it a "nightmare," the silver lining of which is that it "got people stirred up and paying attention."

"That's what we want," Semple adds.

Mayor-elect Lucy Vinis doesn't doubt that there are a lot of eyes on the City Hall issue.

"One thing is very clear," Vinis says, "City Council and staff have learned a lesson."

For her part, Vinis says she's pleased with City Council's decision to prioritize a design that keeps city headquarters close to the County Courthouse and Farmers Market, but agrees the city's recent mistakes have tested Eugeneans' patience across wards.

"The history is, the public was never interested in paying for a new City Hall," Vinis says.

Vinis acknowledges a major challenge upon taking office next month is earning back the public trust. There are several avenues of approach, she notes.

Details remain to be hammered out, but Vinis is considering a handful of different, innovative ways to keep taxpayers in the loop when it comes to projects like City Hall. She envisions a spreadsheet available online that would list active city projects, updated regularly to show their status. She would also like to touch base monthly with a State-of-the-City-style report published in local newspapers the *R-G* and *Eugene Weekly*.

Furthermore, she's open to calls she heard during the election for the hiring of an independent city performance auditor.

Vinis, too, is aware that Ruiz's withholding information has made him a lightning rod for criticism. Ruiz has said there's "no particular reason" he kept council in the dark and Vinis takes him at his word. She suspects he acted without malicious intent, she says.

Vinis points out that the city manager form of government is at the center of a lot of tension these days. It's unclear to Eugene's next mayor whether Ruiz's silence was a judgment error or if he was merely carrying out confused orders given to him by an uncommunicative council.

"It's something to pay close attention to," Vinis says.

No discussions of City Hall are currently on the council's tentative agenda for January 2017 ■

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