

# Key Principles for a Rejuvenated Civic Center

LOCAL ARCHITECTS WEIGH IN ON THE CITY HALL PLAN

**T**he Eugene-Springfield Committee on Local Affairs (CoLA) of the American Institute of Architects – Southwestern Oregon Chapter commends the Eugene City Council for its decision to work with Lane County officials and pursue locating City Hall on the site of the current “butterfly” parking lot at 8th and Oak.

We’re confident locating our new City Hall there can contribute significantly to downtown’s continued revitalization by capitalizing upon a synergy of established public open spaces, symbols of civic engagement, and community-defining facilities. This is a propitious moment worth embracing, an occasion that warrants a proactive and considered evaluation of the prospect at hand.

Toward this goal, we strongly encourage our government leaders to approach plans for City Hall with the following in mind:

## Hit the Reset Button

The bottom line is the new site is very different from the old one; accordingly, the design for our new City Hall deserves a place-specific solution. Its location at the historic heart of downtown, adjacent to the Park Blocks and the existing County Courthouse, sharing a home with the Lane County Farmers’ Market and along Eighth Avenue — conceptually the city’s “Great Street” for civic uses — presents opportunities and challenges not completely shared by City Hall’s previous location.

Simply transplanting the new City Hall design from its old site to the new one unchanged would tragically fail to make the most of a truly unique setting.

## Zoom Out

Thinking broadly, the impact of setting City Hall on the “butterfly” lot parcel will extend well beyond its boundaries and immediate neighbors. This is a chance to make a place where City Hall and the pieces it will touch contribute to a much larger and richer whole.

We can create a strong civic district but also reinforce Eighth Avenue connections to the river and from downtown to the Fifth Street Market District, via Oak Street. There should be a purposeful effort to update master plans for the whole area.

Zooming out should also include new occasions for the public to become informed and involved in the planning process. Citizens deserve a forum in which their voices are heard during the early stages of design.

## Build Upon the Existing Historical and Physical Context

Much more so than the old City Hall site, the “butterfly” lot is central in both historical and physical terms to downtown Eugene. The new City Hall should acknowledge those contexts, the most important of which may be the Park Blocks.

An open and public dialogue to explore their value will be important. The art, stone walls, fish fountain and other elements of the Park Blocks are noteworthy examples of mid-century modern design and iconic elements of downtown Eugene. We believe an artful balance between improvements and preservation is necessary, adding life to the Park Blocks and sympathetically knitting them together with the future City Hall development.

## Reevaluate the Facility Program

Perhaps the change in location warrants a reevaluation of portions of the program. For example, would the prospect of an all-weather shelter for the Farmers’ Market provide a new City Hall with the option of its shared use for civic functions?

Does the fact City Hall will be a backdrop for activities on the Park Blocks (including public gatherings larger than would have been imaginable at the formerly proposed site) prompt an architectural solution tailored to that possibility?

Do we intend City Hall to be primarily ceremonial and symbolic in nature? Or do we want it once again to be an all-encompassing center for the functions of city government, consolidating far-flung departments?

If so, now is the time to anticipate future additions to City Hall.

## Look to Design as a Crime Prevention Tool

All parts of a vibrant civic center can reinforce the safety and security of public spaces using creative Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) principles. Along with its neighbors, a new City Hall can provide “eyes on the street” and discreetly integrate other design strategies supportive of positive behaviors.

Simply encouraging active use of the spaces around the new City Hall would go a long way toward making downtown Eugene attractive to citizens of all ages and from all walks of life.

## Be Municipally Modest

Being municipally modest and cost-conscious is politically desirable, as are mutually beneficial actions on the part of both the city of Eugene and Lane County. Why not propose rehabilitation and repurposing the Lane County Courthouse (after a new courthouse rises on the old City Hall site) for city department offices? Taxpayers will want to know their elected officials are looking at every possible means to prudently stretch available funds.

## Pursue Design Excellence

Being who we are, we believe architecture is an art that goes beyond pragmatic problem solving to reflect the people, place and time of its making. We’re intent on fostering a culture of design excellence in which citizens equate the quality of the built environment with the quality of their lives, and require the standard of environmental design in their community to be commensurate with their best possible self-image.

We know the city of Eugene will continue to set a bar high for the design of City Hall on its new site. A high bar is crucial to changing society’s values structure such that

everyone views public design and the pursuit of design excellence as imperatives.

In addition to CoLA, others in the local design community similarly applaud the collaborative efforts of our local governments and endorse the Eugene City Council’s decision to move City Hall to the site of the “butterfly” lot. Two of the more vocal among their number, **Jerry Diethelm** and **Otto Poticha**, have unabashedly lobbied in favor of this option ever since the old city hall building met its end.

We do think Eugeneans will one day regard the protracted and at times controversial course City Hall traveled to arrive at this point as serendipitous. This is a watershed moment for the project and our downtown; let’s not squander it by failing to make the most of a tremendous opportunity.

*Austin Bailey, Scott Clarke, Eric Gunderson, Stan Honn, Randy Nishimura and Travis Sheridan are members of the Eugene-Springfield Committee on Local Affairs of the American Institute of Architects – Southwestern Oregon Chapter. The opinions expressed above are solely those of the members of CoLA, though we do believe our perspective is shared by a preponderance of AIA-SWO members.*

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