



PHOTO COURTESY OF KEN DARLING

A descendant of Eugene Skinner — the founder of the city of Eugene — is seeking to prevent the proposed land swap for a new Eugene City Hall and Lane County courthouse, on the grounds that such a trade would violate the legal requirements placed on the land when it was donated to the county.

The land swap in question is a deal in which the county would build its new courthouse on the empty lot that previously housed City Hall, and the new City Hall would be built on county land. Officials in both governments say the swap would help re-create the public square at the location of the Park Blocks.

It's unclear why Ken Darling, who claims to be Skinner's great-great-grandson, is troubled by the proposal. He says the proposed land swap disrespects his forefather's wishes. "You don't mess with family," Darling says, "especially if you discount how important these people were to the development of the area."

The original deed donated 40 acres to Lane County, and Skinner required a public square within that acreage and "that the court house be built in the center of said square," the deed says. It further reads that the land was donated "upon condition that the said county seat be and remain at Eugene City, and that said 40 acres of land be appropriated and used for said purposes."

The public square referenced is the Park Blocks at Oak Street and Eighth Avenue, an area which has shrunk significantly since the founding of Eugene due to development in the area. The courthouse is no longer on the public square, and hasn't been since 1960.

The city and county brought their proposed land swap to a judge in Coos County last year, but Judge Richard Barron declined to rule on the case. Lane County's public information officer Devon Ashbridge says, "The judge declined to rule on a similar set of issues as no formal commitments, such as an executed purchase and sale agreement, had been made." At the time of that first petition Darling chose not to intervene in the case.

"I'd like to see the county use the land that they already own and take down the butterfly lot, and start building there," Darling says, adding that he is con-

cerned primarily about the government violating the restrictions of the original deed by moving the city onto the land that was originally the public square and removing the county buildings from that location.

"They just need to follow the deed," he says. "That's it."

Local architect Otto Poticha has done some research into the issue and says he doesn't think the deed still applies to the land in question.

"The north half of the butterfly site and the north half of the courthouse site were not part of the donation, they had already been sold from the donation to private citizens and bought back," Poticha says. "It seems to me the north half, which is the best part for the city hall to be on, is a non-issue."

Deed records from the county assessors' office show that the butterfly lot hasn't changed hands since the county started tracking ownership. The plot currently housing the Lane County courthouse and Harris Hall was sold to R.A. Babb Hardware Company sometime after the land was donated and was sold back to the county in 1958.

On Sept. 5, the county and city filed a new joint petition seeking judicial examination on whether the Skinner deed could prevent the land swap.

Ashbridge says, "A petition would allow both agencies to establish clear legal understanding of the range of property uses available for the Butterfly Lot and for siting the Courthouse." She adds that the process "ensures that any interested person has an opportunity to participate."

A recent opinion piece in *The Register-Guard* by Jim Hargreaves, retired circuit judge, says the worst possible outcome "would be that the title to all of the 40-acre donation by the Skinners that is still owned by the county could revert to the Skinners' heirs."

That would put the land between Seventh and Eighth streets and West Park and Pearl streets back in the hands of the those heirs, according to Hargreaves.

Darling says his family likely won't fight to acquire the land from the county, but instead he will try to ensure that the deed is followed. "We just want to be validated," he says.

The joint petition for judicial examination of the issue is set to be filed in September. ■

SLANT

• Eugene Opera's dramatic resurrection from near bankruptcy continued this week with the naming of Andrew Bizantz as artistic director

and Erika Rauer as executive director. Bisantz is a familiar and much-loved figure at the podium here. Rauer, a soprano who's performed at Oper Bremen, Opera Boston and Tanglewood, has also worked as director of education for New York City Opera and manager of elementary school programs at Carnegie Hall. The opera also announced a new season: *Barber of Seville* Dec. 30-31 and Ástor Piazzolla's tango operetta *María de Buenos Aires* on May 4 and 6. You can meet the new leadership team when the opera holds a town hall meeting from 6 to 7:30 pm Monday, Sept. 11, at the Eugene Public Library, 100 W. 10th Avenue.

• Dolores Huerta, co-founder of the United Farm Workers of America, lays out the best advice for all of us after Trump's cruel DACA decision on Sept. 5: Organize, register to vote, file citizenship papers now and organize to affect the 2018 elections. She was responding to questions from Amy Goodman on *Democracy Now!* The subject of a new film *Dolores*, Huerta is a frequent speaker and visitor to Lane County. She's is a lifelong civil rights activist and is now president of the Dolores Huerta Foundation for Community Organizing. We at EW also recommend calling your representatives and demanding action.

• Eugene Mayor Lucy Vinis' study group on performance auditors will hold its sixth public meeting at 5:30 pm Monday, Sept. 11, at 990 W. Seventh Avenue. Members are contacting cities and counties around the country that have performance auditors, asking a rather lengthy list of questions. Results of the queries will be presented this fall to a City Council work session. The study group's formation has raised eyebrows since a separate initiative petition to establish an independent elected performance auditor is already collecting signatures and is likely headed for the ballot in May. Will the mayor's study group enlighten, or will it just confuse the public when it comes time to vote? Meeting notices and rough minutes are available online at eugeneperformanceauditor.org.

• We've started listening to the podcast "Small Town Dicks," which takes listeners behind the scenes of "small town" crimes. The town isn't so small — it's actually Eugene/Springfield. And the show strengthens the area's Simpsons connections with star Yeardeley Smith doing much of the voicing. The podcast, while perhaps lacking the smoothness of a show like "S-Town," is engrossing because it does what so many shows try to do and takes listeners beyond the headlines. While names have been changed and the stories made anonymous, anyone who follows the news can easily deduce just which crime the show is delving into. The first episode goes behind the scenes — in some grisly detail — of the murder of a young woman by her former boyfriend. While the show hides the names, Lane County will remember this is the case of Casey Wright, who was killed in a brutal incident of intimate partner violence. And that perhaps is the biggest strength of "Small Town Dicks": That it doesn't let us forget what goes on in our town. You can find episodes at smalltowndicks.com/media. You can check out EW's own "What's Happening" podcast on our website.



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