

Park Central: A Bait and Switch

You know those little puzzles, where you move a number to the side to maneuver another into the place you want it to go? Well, that's exactly the strategy needed to achieve the downtown central park, central public plaza, central market square that we've long been waiting for. This isn't a new idea. It's been in our Downtown Plan for years. It calls for a central gathering space downtown - our own version of Pioneer Courthouse Square. It calls out for a place to better accommodate our Farmer's and Saturday markets and our own Festival of Flowers. We all know that Eugene needs a center to, well, center our celebrations of who we are together.

So what has to be moved and where? I'll give you a hint. It has to do with removing a species of butterfly, made out of concrete, that is not an endangered species but ought to be. I'm of course referring to the "Butterfly Parking Lot" that now occupies most of our North Park Block.

So where would we move or replace this needed and convenient parking?

Those who have been following the Whole Foods, parking garage controversy all recently learned about the lost secret of the county parking garage on 6th between Oak and Pearl.

It looks like just a surface lot, but it actually has one additional level underground that is connected back to the County Public Service Building. Everyone had somehow forgotten that the garage foundations were built to allow for four more floors of structured parking. That's right. It is already structurally prepared for vertical expansion, which greatly reduces construction costs.

This serendipity comes from having had to cope with the ubiquitous high water table downtown when the garage was built. A three-foot thick concrete slab was required across the entire site in order to keep underground water pressure from pushing the garage up and out of the ground, according to architect Otto Poticha.

What kept the garage down is now just what is required to hold the new floors up. Earthquake forces for a new addition are easily handled in the construction of required new stairwells and elevator shafts.

Moreover, the garage is also appropriately located on what is already a car dominated street, not one where a parking structure is going to interrupt our aspirations for a "great street" pedestrian march toward the river.

Bait & Switch

So, the bait is recovering our North Park Block, seizing the opportunity to remove the "ing" from parking, so to speak. The lure is the opportunity to create a new central square and perhaps some special shelters for our markets. The hope is for our own festival, market, civic place and the return of the North Park Block to vital public use.

The switch is to consolidate county and other parking in the place where it can be done with some economy and minimal urban impact, freeing us up to finally accomplish a long sought-after downtown goal.

Bait and switch is of course a confidence game. What we need are some bright people in city and county government with sharp cooperating pencils and enough confidence to seize this special opportunity.

See: you just move this one piece over there and the one you want falls right into place.

Jerry Diethelm
Mar. 20, 2006