

Last Chance for Eugene's Millrace

Jerry Diethelm

Perhaps we should just put them in a pipe and bury them - our hopes and dreams that is for a healthy and hard-working Millrace through downtown. Because that is what will happen if we go ahead with the current Chiquita cannery neighborhood plan associated with building the new federal courthouse. While everyone is eagerly waiting for the unveiling of a spectacular new building, hardly anyone is paying attention to the poor quality of the overall site and transportation planning that will determine its downtown riverfront setting.

Perhaps we should also throw away a few chapters of our historic memories of the area and just rename it the Courthouse District, because that will be the consequence of building the proposed 6th and 7th highway along the railroad tracks. This almost 200' transportation corridor, which includes the 60' railroad right of way, will certainly erase our last and best chance of Millrace restoration, and it will seriously jeopardize the potential of realizing a new mixed-use cannery neighborhood well-connected to the riverfront.

At issue is the transportation proposal to relocate 6th and 7th along the tracks. On the one hand, the proposed new highway corridor will move cars swiftly and efficiently, leaving the area beneath it no longer bounded by Broadway traffic and free to rejoin the city fabric. On the other, lifting all the area traffic and bunching it together along the tracks creates a significant barrier to the riverfront.

We're being told it won't really be that bad, and that usually means that it will.

There is a pervasive and increasingly uneasy feeling in our town that we're about to make a big mistake, one that we'll have to live with for a hundred years. Everyone knows that no town with a choice is willingly walling off its riverfront any more, and most are struggling to overcome such past errors. Certainly there will be consequences. The existing businesses of Broadway will be drained of their livelihood when the traffic is transferred to the tracks. A new 6th, sandwiched between the railroad and 7th, will no longer be able to provide any commercial access in the area. In its reduced role as a speedy bypass, it will only add to the perception of separation from the riverfront.

Knowledgeable readers of time know too that there are three storied layers on the Chiquita site, three eras of our collective civic experience etched into the memory of this place. One is past. One is passing and one is about to begin. They are called Millrace, cannery, courthouse.

For 80 years it was the Millrace District. We invited the river in - with appropriate caution, since there were no dams on the Willamette - and braided it deeply into our lives. The Millrace was the river. There was no question about it.

For another 70 years, it was the Cannery District, although we called it the Eugene Food Grower's Co-operative and later Agripac and then Chiquita. In forgotten transitional years, we

floated food down the Millrace to process at the co-op and send to market. And then in 1949 the lower tail of the Millrace was buried under the Mill St. approach to a new Ferry Street Bridge, where for the past 50 years it has played its sad role as a slow drain on the spirit of Eugene.

Now a new exciting courthouse era is about to begin, and the question is whether the new plans will be a rich palimpsest of time and times or we will wipe the parchment clean. The clear choice would seem to be an acknowledgment of that “deep and running vein” of authenticity that would resurface with our Millrace.

Other towns have been up to it. Springfield's mayor recently announced their commitment to restoring and developing their historic millrace. Pringle Creek in Salem, an underground pipe until the 70s, is now that delightful stream that runs from Willamette University campus to the statehouse. Portland is resurfacing Tanner Creek as a central feature of its new Pearl District. This is Eugene's best and probably last chance to remember itself and return with its Millrace to the river. But it will require a less divisive transportation solution for the area and a civic willingness to speak up for the Millrace before it is too late. It's time to tell the mayor and city council that you care.

Let us recall this place and rebuild it as our Millrace - Cannery - Courthouse Neighborhood place, in recognition of the three layers of time that live here. It can't be true, can it, what some are saying about Eugene: that our civic mind is just a fickle tube, able to hold but one era at a time, so that when we put a new one in, any former is pushed out?