

Millrace Anyone? - Sept.18, 2004

The mills of justice grind slowly, they say, but exceedingly fine. Wouldn't it be grand if those judicious millers in their new signature courthouse had a real water source again to turn those metaphoric wheels?

And wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to follow a resurfaced Millrace once again through the courthouse neighborhood and down and through a splendid new gateway underpass to the Willamette riverfront - our public downtown riverfront. I'm talking about the area between the EWEB headquarters building and the old Art Deco steam being brought to urban life by a substantial public passage and a Millrace running through it to the river.

Remember, it's not EWEB's waterfront and it's not Triad's. It's our public downtown riverfront. Connecting downtown, Eighth Ave., the courthouse district and the riverfront has been central to our downtown vision for the past ten years. And it's a cold heart that hasn't felt former Mayor Ruth Bascom's call to Return to the River.

It's a year now since the Planning Commission (Oct. '03) and City council (Nov. '03) both voted unanimously to support a full restoration effort, raising all our hopes, and Congressman Peter De Fazio included \$20 million for the Millrace in water resources bill, H.R. 2557.

So what's happened and how far along is our City Development Department in carrying out the Council's directive to try to realize Eugene Park's planner Robin Hostick's Millrace restoration plan?

Unfortunately, the possibility of a resurfaced Millrace project seems to have gotten silently buried again under the effort to realize a hospital on the EWEB site. And H.R. 2557, which did pass out of the House, is still awaiting conference committee resolution in a stormy political season.

The \$25 million system of riverfront roads that Triad needs (and the Council too quickly approved) to make its hospital accessible has seriously compromised the Millrace restoration task, putting too many new barriers in its path.

It is hard enough to get under the existing sixty feet of railroad right-of-way. Last year's Council decision to reroute Sixth Ave. along the south side of the

tracks had already made the necessary underpass that much longer. Adding the new hospital access road parallel to the railroad on its north side puts us back to where we were when the city was proposing to run both Sixth and Seventh Aves. along the railroad. All these barriers add up to too much width and become too many hurdles - even for a Track Town U.S.A.

The problem is one-track thinking and a not very consistent or resolute commitment to a public return to the river. Each new proposal for the courthouse and riverfront area, whether for roads or a hospital, a Millrace or any other use, needs to be evaluated for its potential to help further our main goal of connecting the courthouse area to the Willamette riverfront.

This is a complex site that requires a more complex plan if we are going to complete our downtown to the river vision. There is more than one way to site a hospital here, if that's what it's going to be, and the way that's wanted is one that also helps us achieve our other civic goals.

Note to the Tourism Task Force: people would actually be drawn here to see and experience our downtown to riverfront connection, and an investment in this kind of urban history and amenity would be developer candy for would-be Millrace/courthouse district partners. People familiar with the economics of the Paseo del Rio in San Antonio will tell you that their River Walk adds billions of dollars every year to the San Antonio economy. Tourists supposedly spend an hour at the Alamo and the rest of their time and money along that beautiful waterway.

And wouldn't it be timely in Eugene to have a project that unites the city rather than divides it?

Rebuilding the Millrace isn't a liberal or conservative project. It's a Eugene project of town pride, character with a unifying vision, a vision of connecting the university, the downtown, the new Millrace/Cannery/Courthouse/Willamette Riverfront district with an a deep and running thread that ties and binds.

The Millrace is for all Eugene.

(Maybe in 2016 our Knight will come.)