

An Informal Critique

I thought the newly delivered EWEB Master Plan deserved at least an informal review so I knocked on the door of my old friend and urban design expert, P.J. Critique.

He answered in his standard attire since he rarely goes out and spends 24 hours a day reviewing planning reports. Coming right to the point, I asked him what he thought of the ¾" thick EWEB Master Plan.

"Well, figure about \$1,000,000 an inch. This one only cost \$500,000, so I'd say it's a bargain, he replied. But I could see he was jesting. I'd asked him one time why he always wore pajamas and he'd replied, "People blanch at the naked truth."

Anticipating a potential blanch, he had me sit down before delivering his direct shot: "It's not a Master Plan!"

Recovering from my transient ischemia, I asked, "What was it then?"

"It's mainly a vision plan that can yet be made into a framework plan if enough people begin to appreciate the difference. Because it's a difference that will make a difference." And people will feel cheated if what they like about the plan gets traded away in the development process.

"You see, master plans have largely gone out of fashion in planning, except on military bases and other islands of authority," he explained. "They're just too inflexible and fixed. Something major changes, they're out of date. Besides, the master/slave metaphor sets up false expectations. A person with money to invest comes along and when you say, 'We want it this way,' s/he of course replies, 'You want it that way, you pay for it. There goes the plan.'"

"You're saying it's really a vision plan being touted as a master plan that needs to become a framework plan?"

"Right," he said, scratching close to the truth. "It's a successful vision plan because it satisfies a vision plan's primary function - even with some major errors and omissions."

"Which I'm sure you're eager to point out. But what's its big accomplishment?"

"Uniting a large majority of the community behind the vision of a more socially active and urban downtown riverfront. The sine qua non of the project was the finding of an acceptable and mutually reinforcing relationship between developable property and an active public open space system at the riverfront.

"The local consultants' riverfront vision has already gained a significant measure of public support. Let's give them all the credit they deserve."

"Enough of the honey, what's the downside?"

"Well, would you really want a high-voltage line running diagonally across your main riverfront

open space?

“Plus there’s no guarantee the proposed open spaces will end up in the amounts and locations proposed unless the city actually partitions the land into a public-private framework to fix the pattern. A vision plan says, ‘this is the way we’d like to have it.’ A framework plan, backed by partitioning, zoning and ordinances says, ‘this is the framework your development proposals will be required to fit into. There’s a lot left up in the air here besides unattractive power lines.

“For example, costs. There is no cost analysis for any of the public improvements being proposed. How much will it cost for the basic road system? Sloping the bank down to the river? No developer will be willing to pay for site improvements that are primarily for the benefit of the whole community.

“The main entrance to the site at 6th Ave. and Hilyard doesn’t work. At best, it’s too tight and awkward along the railroad right-of-way to get into, especially when one of those 24 trains a day is coming through, and you can’t go east coming out. If I were running a business on restaurant row, I’d want to be closer to the 5th Ave. side.

“And parking for the new development is unresolved. That was main criticism of the ORI project next door, a 200-car parking lot on our riverfront. And that was just one building!

“But connections, connections, connections are what will make this sequestered site useful and valuable. A bridge to Alton Baker Park at the end of 8th could carry that unsightly power line, create a circular promenade with the De Fazio Bridge and seriously sew up the EWEB narrow strip into the central park.

“Not recognizing the importance of the bridge or connecting to the courthouse under the tracks at Ferry Street and running the Millrace on through is just Eugene giving up again and settling for second class.”

“P.J.,” I said, “if you really believe Eugene ‘never misses an opportunity to miss an opportunity,’ why do you live here?”

“Think about it,” he replied, “if this place ever found the courage to live up to its billing, I’d have nothing to do.”