

Ripeness Is All

Keys to overcoming inertia

by Jerry Diethelm

Things change when the time is ripe, when people, communities, nations, systems, places are ready to transform. Situations, like fruit, always need to ripen. Consummation is an overflowing cup — as in love.

They say design changes existing situations into preferred ones, but that tends to ignore the powerful inertia that must be overcome for all but the smallest changes. The foot-dragging force that suffocates desirable change takes many familiar forms. “There are rules, you know, customs, traditions,” as in the unfortunate plastering of road signs on the new I-5 bike bridge.

How about this one? “We just can’t afford it. Signature beauty is far too subjective a matter for us engineers.” You’ll no doubt recognize ODOT’s recent snookering of Eugene’s desire for a landmark bridge by hiding their agency’s practices and real priorities behind a budget that is much more fungible than they’ll admit. Cable-stayed bridges? In your dreams! “Oh, all right. We’ll sign up a small one.”

It takes two key forces to overturn such inertia: an adequate dissatisfaction with the present condition and the political support for a more compelling possibility that is attractive enough to overcome the fear of change.

Take national health care, for example. Almost so ripe you can smell it. Almost everyone is dissatisfied. Millions don’t have it. Businesses can’t afford it. The system is wasteful and broken. All that is needed now is a compelling idea.

Here, let me design it for you: I’ll call it American Medical Insurance. AMI also derives from the romance language words for friend, ami (French), amici (Italian) amigo (Spanish) and the Latin, amare, to love. The point is that friends help you to take care of yourself in your everyday life and in your time of need. For everyone over 65, AMI is called Medicare.

Here’s how it should work: Private insurance moves to a supplementary role as in Medicare, and you can supplement it to your heart’s content. What they won’t be able to do anymore is exclude people from primary care because they can’t make any money from the transaction.

Will ODOT reform itself and build new bridges to the community? (Will the Eugene Police Employees Association?) Neither appears dissatisfied in the least, and we’re far too distracted with potholes, Tasers and the perverse need to turn teenagers protesting pesticides into felons.

Do we have a better answer to the bike bridge sign problem? Easy, change the too-rigid rules to allow information signs in the median before the bridge and put an exit sign in a timely location off to the right. But changing ODOT and federal highway imperatives is harder than making rivers flow backwards. Moses and a lot of other very persuasive people would have to care a lot to turn this one around.

Same with the I-5 bridge design. There is some spotty and sporadic grumbling but still an inadequate dissatis-

faction to overcome ODOT's stubborn resistance to the public's preferred design, which was already a come-down from what was needed to make the crossing sing. Maybe the new New Deal can bring back the ideal of public works as something special, things designed to reach beyond themselves and contribute to the rebuilding of our national pride and spirit.

Do I consider downtown ripe? There is certainly adequate and abundant dissatisfaction, but the compelling community vision, that which would tip us in a new direction, is still missing. In spite of some very prominent and patriotic attempts to sell the community on one more multi-million dollar shopping adventure investment downtown, the voters just couldn't buy it or believe in it anymore. And were we lucky; fears about the financial viability of the "big bang" for West Broadway have proved all too real. The city would have bought a lot of property at a premium and then been left holding the bag. Whew!

The problem with an economic turndown is that everyone hunkers down, and dissatisfactions are put on hold. There is a tendency to close up shop on the Department of Urban Visions and be satisfied with making do.

Is there a planning and design equivalent to buying when the market is super low and selling high? Not many know that the basic planning for the San Antonio River Walk, a billion dollar producing Millrace-like environment, was actually done during the Great Depression. When times were slow, that community had the wits to plan their city for better times to come.

Today we better understand the basic ingredients. Overcoming inertia and producing ripeness require tending to both of the forces that produce change. One half of those forces, like half a wit, won't get it done.