

Tales From the Pit

More holes downtown need filling

by Jerry Diethelm

The Eugene City Council voted 7-1 recently to select the five-story, mixed-use office and apartment project put forward by local developers Wally Graf and Nathan Philips over a competing proposal by OPUS Development to build six stories of student apartments across from the Eugene Public Library.

I thought it was a good decision but couldn't help glancing backwards through the previous design lives that became the Sears Hole and wondering if there were still more to come. Whatever happens, the hole is pooling up with stories.

I remember shopping at the Sears store before it moved to its new and bigger digs at Gateway. It was a homely building, a bulky concrete pile. It was far too small to hold all those items in the catalog. It couldn't begin to accommodate the growing space needs and freeway-related merchandising changes that drove the great downtown escape and the mistaken medicine of the mall.

You have to be quick to catch the irony here: The catalog store that once shipped directly to your door turned itself into just another asphalt lake-dependent mall outlet that made you come and get it — only to be superseded by Internet shopping that once more brings it to your door. But not from Sears.

For a while the forlorn and abandoned building served as a skid row for second-hand furniture, a place where motley rows of chairs were flanked by idle couches that looked like they were napping on themselves. Occasionally they'd move a few chairs out on the sidewalk for some sun. I know this because one called to me one day. More than its memory is behind this tale.

Then came the first design for a new library. I vividly recall how disappointing it was, looking at the architectural model on display and discovering that it was just an eclectic façade wrapped around the sad old store.

I'm sure it seemed a very practical approach — reusing the existing structure — something even the strictest and stingiest Libertarian might have been tricked into voting for. But how discouraging, I imagined, for the library staff, who must have dreamed of something better than having modern library functions and services shoehorned into the ill-proportioned spaces of that concrete crate.

Fortunately it didn't fly. We could imagine, did imagine, and eventually built much better. Today, there is a world of difference in the quality of the architecture of our EPL

with its Rose windows and the experience it provides, whether you're a fan of the airplane hangar roof or not.

Next came the Oregon Research Institute, which was serious about building an environmentally advanced office tower on the Sears site. We raised our hopes. In preparation, City Manager Dennis Taylor razed the old building. He took it on himself to dig the urban hole we sing about today. When it became clear that ORI's financing was also in the hole and there was to be no \$2 million subsidy forthcoming from the city, all hopes sank to the bottom of the lake.

Consider that the present subsidy for the WG project is calculated at \$3.9 million — OPUS was asking for \$6.9 million — and the \$2 million it would have cost the city to keep ORI (and all those researchers and outside research dollars) downtown would have been a bargain. Consider too that the ORI project would have left a quarter of a block for another use, say perhaps one of the urban park or square proposals across from the library that many would prefer. And consider that \$3.9 million — \$2 million equals \$1.9 million of public budget dollars that might have helped to build that park.

The real design hole in this saga, however, is the absence of a park and open space framework plan for the downtown and this SW sector of the city.

Not having one means that when requests for proposals (RFPs) are sent out, developers like WG or OPUS aren't given enough explicit direction about how to fit their design proposals into the larger public context *because one hasn't been developed*.

And not having a public framework area plan means having no clear criteria for evaluating whether a development proposal like WG or OPUS furthers city goals for public spaces in a downtown sector *because there aren't any* — other than some inadequate statements about Great Streets or maybe someday resurfacing the Millrace — in the Downtown Plan.

This allows us to argue endlessly — and usually after the fact — about our individual visions for public space downtown.

Former City Manager Mike Gleason dug a crater of a hole under the planning process in the 1980s when he stuck parks planning and design functions under Public Works. Thus, Planning and Development is downtown, and Parks Planning is out on Roosevelt. The physical separation only reinforces the fact that they aren't conceived whole either, resulting in the wrong person often doing the right thing in the wrong way.

Getting the planning functions reassembled and the right talent assigned to the right tasks won't immediately fill all the holes that need filling, but it will at least help us stop digging and start doing some better planning.