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## NEWS: DOWNTOWN: A RIVER SHOULD RUN THROUGH IT

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By Bob Welch, Register-Guard columnist, Nov 15, 2009

Was anyone really surprised that a recent free-parking experiment on Broadway barely drew more cars — 7 percent — than the usual pay-to-park setup?

The problem with downtown Eugene isn't folks having to search for quarters, it's folks having to search for reasons to make downtown a destination in the first place.

Which is why it's easy to get excited about Eugene Water & Electric Board's unveiling of plans to connect downtown to the Willamette River via 27 acres of property it will be vacating.

You want to revive downtown? Give people more reasons to want to spend time in that downtown, which a river connection will do.

The operative word here is "more." Nobody's saying downtown doesn't have good stores, eateries and other draws. We have a first-class performing arts center, library, outdoor markets, galleries and more.

We have reasons to come, just not enough to draw the critical masses of people who make a downtown vibrant.

And that's what our downtown needs: people, preferably the law-abiding type who respect the rights of others.

"What attracts people most is other people," the late William Whyte, one of the world's experts on human behavior in urban settings, told me in the 1980s when Bellevue, Wash., was trying to humanize its lifeless downtown.

And yet the New York man understood, more than most, that you can design plazas and parks — spaces — that draw people to them. That a fountain can create white noise between an urban space and the street. And that folks not willing to play by a community's rules — folks who vandalize, leave beer bottles, urinate on buildings — tend to go where people are not, and not where people are.

"They are uncomfortable in the spotlight," longtime Eugene activist John Brown says. "Get people down here and those destroying it will leave."

Brown has a unique perspective on EWEB's river-downtown connection: He's on EWEB's board, works downtown in commercial real estate and, for more than a decade, has led efforts to clean up the Willamette — usually while rowing his drift boat.

"It's a perfect thing to do," Brown says of the waterfront plan. "We can have proximity to the river without screwing it up."

However, this is, of course, Eugene, where some see progressivism as stomping out any signs of progress. Some will rail that development along the waterfront will destroy the river, that we should leave it as it is.

Yes, we should be protective of the Willamette, which is already on American Rivers' endangered list. But having seen the garbage and human waste left on the banks by the homeless, Brown laughs at the idea that "natural" necessarily equates to "pristine."

"I challenge you to get out of your boat every 100 yards and not find piles of human waste," he says.

Sometimes, natural is best; wilderness areas come to mind. And, sometimes, people can enhance the natural, complementing it without compromising it.

Witness the Spokane River as it rampages through the city's downtown and the Boise River fly fishers casting their lines only blocks from high rises. Witness Seattle's vibrant Elliott Bay waterfront and Bend tying not only its downtown to the Deschutes River, but its newly developed Mill District. And witness Corvallis' inviting riverside walkway that connects the Willamette to a mix of restaurants that are thriving because of that link.

To see EWEB's three preliminary design options is to understand that this isn't about encasing the river in concrete a la San Antonio (which, some who've been on its River Walk will tell you, works splendidly, although I'm not a fan). This isn't about turning the Laura Ingalls Willamette into a Paris Hilton makeover.

It's about realizing that while leaving the vast majority of the Willamette River alone as the bike-path-lined wonder that it is, we can create visual access to the waters that will help revive downtown.

It has been nearly three decades since the Hult Center, in 1982, did something similar. In the meantime, a lot of water has slipped beneath the Ferry Street Bridge.

Isn't it time we dared to think big again?

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