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City of Ashland Space Needs--Offices and Parking

The subject of how and where to house our growing city government has again arisen after 20 years of quiet. For new comers, in 1980 the City Council voted to budget funds to build City offices where the police station is located, thereby electing to have government abandon the downtown to tourism. This decision followed the prevailing post World War II mentality of killing off traditional downtowns by moving everything from them to suburban style settings. At about the same time Ashland hired a new Community Development Director, John Fregonese who would become a national leader in municipal land use planning due to his originality, passion, and vision.

Because of John's efforts, by the late 1980's many Oregon cities looked to Ashland for guidance concerning many planning issues, such as how to retard sprawl, conserve resources, reduce vehicle trips, provide more landscaping, and lay out sites to encourage aesthetics and pedestrian access.

John was against moving City Hall, and as Community Development Director he would not agree to recommend approval for any planning action calling for such a move. But he left at the end of 1991 to direct growth management in the Portland Metro area. His immediate successor had neither the strength nor conviction to battle the move. Thus, in 1993 a planning action was presented to build a 10,000 square foot building on East Main St. that was billed as "just moving the Planning Department". The hidden issue was that the Community Development Department (Planning Department etc) only needed 4000 square feet so the extra space really meant that the entire municipal government was moving from the downtown.

This fortunately resulted in controversy, and by the time this unwise decision was tabled and then reversed, the Governor's Office, 1000 Friends of Oregon, The Oregon Downtown Association, and the Department of Land Conservation and Development all voiced their objection to the removal of Ashland's City Hall to a suburban type location on East Main St.. Plus, a formidable Ashland citizens group recruited by local designers Rick and Gail Vezie planned to appeal the decision with the help of the aforementioned organizations.

Finally the Hillah Temple property was purchased on Winburn Way and the Planning, Building, and Engineering Departments were housed in a new one story (unfortunately) Community Development Building that was tall enough to look as if it were two. For 14 years that building met the needs of the City.

But now the nearby administrative offices need more room, so what are Ashland's options? Do we have another battle about a suburban type location versus downtown core location. Or can we again decide to keep our local government where it belongs and explore additional space options downtown.

The existing City Hall building is not much of a treasure, but the outer shell can be preserved and the entire interior could be demolished and rebuilt with an extra story. This would satisfy important seismic considerations. Or additional stories could be added to the Community Development Building while incorporating a needed elevator to also service the Alice Piel Walkway.

Any downtown building proposal naturally brings up the issue of parking. And someday as occurred in many European cities, Ashland will have to excavate for an underground parking facility either below the Plaza (with flood protection safeguards and pumps) or below the parking lot at the corner of Lithia Way and Pioneer Streets. This last property might also provide a location for the City Hall if decision makers elect to pursue that as a third possible location and consolidate all downtown government functions into one building.

Thus, we have two issues to debate: 1.) A new or expanded City Hall and 2.) More parking, preferably underground.

Wherever City Hall is located, it will need to have better access to the Mayor's, City Administrator's, Finance Director's and City Attorney's offices than at present. The blocking off of the former stairway entrance from the Plaza proved to be a barrier to accessibility to the detriment of good communication between citizens and the staff that Ashland citizens pay for.

Brent Thompson over 30 years served on 7 City decision making bodies including 10 years on the Planning Commission and 2 years on the City Council.

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