

Strange is Life

Life is strange. From birth until death, mysteries abound. No one -- not scientists, not religious leaders, nobody -- knows everything about anything.

This is a good thing. Certainty is for machines that act robotically. For four billion years or so, life has evolved in unpredictable, though natural, ways. So let's invert my words:

Strange is life. At the core of each of us beats a marvelous heart of strangeness. We feel it pulsating in ooh! and ah! moments when a burst of mysterious beauty breaks through the mundane veil that often shrouds our consciousness.

Cities also have a heart of strangeness. Downtown. A dynamic core where people congregate to live, work, and play, celebrating the diversity of their individual strangenesses.

Some downtowns, of course, resonate with more energy than others. Whenever I visit downtown Salem, which is frequently, I feel: "So much potential; so much more to become."

I love the historic buildings, the large trees, the quirky small businesses. I hate the car-centric street design, the shuttered storefronts, the dearth of people. I sense a downtown on the cusp.

Where, sadly, it has been poised since I moved here 36 years ago. Between vitality and lethargy, bustling and moribund, beautiful and blah.

When something is on the edge, like Salem's downtown, pushing it the wrong way must be avoided at all costs. Doing nothing is better than tilting the balance in an undesirable direction.

Unfortunately, Salem's current City leaders -- mayor, city manager, councillors, department heads -- have been sucking the life out of downtown in disturbing ways. Here's three examples:

Giving the OK to US Bank to remove five large, healthy trees on State Street. Public testimony and expert advice screamed "prune, don't cut

down.” No good reason to chainsaw the trees ever was provided by the City of Salem or US Bank. Downtown has been diminished.

So will it be if the City’s obsessive compulsion to construct an unneeded, unwanted, and unpaid-for Third Bridge isn’t cured. Hardly anyone wants to spend \$700 million on a bridge heading from West Salem to the nowhere that is Keizer Station. Except Chamber of Commerce execs and the Realtors Association.

Public servants should serve the public interest, not special interests. And especially not their own interests.

Yet City leaders want parking meters in Salem’s Historic District. Not to improve the attractiveness or economic vitality of downtown. To raise money for operating parking structures. So visitors would have to pay to plug meters in on-street parking needed by small businesses, while off-street parking in structures needed by large stores would be free.

Fight for your right to a strangely dynamic downtown. Just as people can’t be healthy without a strong heart, neither can a city. Be bold in telling city leaders: “Stop trying to smother the central soul of Salem!”

Visit StrangeUpSalem.com. Read a post there about ways you can act now to strengthen downtown. Don’t sit idle. Support strangeness. And give us a Facebook hug/like.

Strange Up Salem seeks to lift our city’s Blah Curse. Brian Hines blogs at hinesblog.com