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NEWS LOCAL NEWS

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EUGENE WATER AND ELECTRIC BOARD

## Riverfront letdown

Salem's ambitious mixed-use development project fizzles

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*Brian Hines pays a visit a stalled development at the site of the old Boise Cascade plant next to the Willamette River in downtown Wednesday, March 6, 2013. (Chris Pietsch/The Register-Guard)*

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*The Register-Guard*

PUBLISHED: 12:00 A.M., MARCH 18

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Riverfront planners say they've painted a vision of the shared longings of Eugene residents for a place downtown along the Willamette River to play and rest.

The ecstatic testimony to date on the proposal for the Eugene Water & Electric Board site would seem to prove them right.

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But there's a hazard in arousing public expectations for a project when nobody can say whether it's likely ever to be built, given the intricacies of the proposition and the fickle real estate marketplace. Mass enthusiasm can easily turn to mass disappointment.

Just ask the Tokarski family of Salem, who have developed more than \$1 billion in real estate over four decades.

Six years ago, patriarch Larry Tokarski and a partner spent \$7.25 million to buy an old Boise Cascade plant on a prominent corner on the south side of downtown Salem — right along the Willamette River. They planned a mixed-use development with 200 condominiums, retail underneath, public plazas, pathways and restaurants with views of the Willamette.

They allowed for green space and for unearthing Pringle Creek, which had flowed beneath the industrial site for more than 90 years, according to coverage in The Statesman-Journal newspaper. The developers adopted many ideas that the Urban Land Institute generated for the property.

Salem was jazzed by the picture the developers painted.

“Salem has the opportunity of a lifetime here,” the mayor proclaimed.

A Statesman-Journal executive editor opined that the project would “transform Salem’s image while stimulating downtown to become an urbane and culturally interesting destination.”

The waterfront was poised to be a gem, said Salem’s longtime public works director, who had gone to work for the developer.

Brian Hines, a Salem resident and blogger, imagined a gracious scene, as in Paris or, at least, San Antonio, with a waterfront strung with walking paths and bejeweled with restaurants.

“You could go down and walk around at night and be connected to downtown,” Hines said. “You could sit down in a nice restaurant and watch the lights.

“Developers come in with their little boards and make it all look wonderful.”

The Salem mayor climbed a backhoe to strike a ceremonial blow at the facade of the first industrial building to be razed. The Salem City Council obliged by approving the South Waterfront Mixed Use Zone — just as the Eugene City Council is expected to do for the riverfront plan here soon.

## **Dreams dashed**

The parallels between the Salem project and the Eugene riverfront plans are significant.

The Salem property, like Eugene, is along the river and bisected by an active railroad track. The Eugene plan also envisions a mixed-use neighborhood with retail below and condominiums above.

Salem residents were thrilled about opening up Pringle Creek. Eugene residents want the same for the long-buried Eugene Millrace.

Salem residents imagined themselves sipping coffee or beer and watching the Willamette idle by — just as people in Eugene are doing now.

The Eugene Riverfront Master Plan is so very sensitive and well thought out, “It’s just everything a community could possibly want,” Eugene resident Jo McDow said at a public hearing.

But Salem’s dream never came to pass. Instead, the project stopped and was frozen in time for four years.

A half-raised Boise Cascade building continues to “uglify” the prominent corner south of downtown Salem, Hines said.

Finally, in November, the Tokarski family announced that the mixed-use plans weren’t workable. The developer submitted plans for a 118-unit apartment complex, which they hope to start building in June.

The Salem planning staff had to tell the developer that, as part of the new plan for the waterfront, the city’s rules require more public access and more bicycle parking than the developer was proposing for the apartment complex. Those features were among the many hallmarks of the original mixed-use vision.

“Now, they’re going to have a fence that blocks off people from the development,” Hines said. “You’re rolling along on your roller blades or your stroller, and you want to go through the development. You can’t. There’s going to be locked gates, even gates for the paths. ...

“It’s going to be a shadow of what was promised back in 2009.”

No restaurants will offer a riverside meal.

“That’s one concept that we have thoroughly vetted and that we simply cannot get interest in from either local (restaurants) or national franchises,” said Jason Tokarski, who is overseeing the development now for his family’s Mountain West Investment Corp.

## **“It’s not Portland”**

In February, the developers announced that Marquis Companies of Milwaukie would add a 52-bed nursing home to the site. Construction is expected to begin early next year.

The site will now have two main uses: apartments and a nursing home, one Salem area blogger noted. “This doesn’t exactly scream ‘downtown living.’”

The Tokarski family was facing exceptionally nasty headwinds. They unveiled their vision for the mixed use project in 2008, during the biggest economic downturn since the Great Depression.

“(It’s) a context you can’t really leave out of that comparison,” said Kaarin Knudson, whose firm, Rowell Brokaw Architects, was hired to shepherd the Eugene project.

Consequently, the Tokarskis are chastened. They’re reluctant to show watercolor renderings of development plans.

“I want to be careful that we are not showing something that gets everyone excited,” Tokarski said. “Over the years, it has been difficult to reframe the project in the public’s eyes and to help the city staff and the community understand what would really work on the site — given the economic challenges that persist.

“Salem is not a high-rent market, whether it’s commercial or retail or apartments. It’s not Portland, and neither is Eugene.”

The development has retained one feature the Salem public had dreamed of. The Tokarskis hired Eugene’s Staton Companies’ demolition experts to break open a 50-foot swath of concrete that covers Pringle Creek.

Eventually, the public will be able to walk creek-side from Salem City Hall, under the busy Commercial Street to where the creek pours into the Willamette.

## **DAY 2 OF 2**