

Connecting the Dots: Why Salem projects often fail

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A common thread runs through Salem, from the old Boise Cascade property across downtown parking spaces and into the city's seismically unstable civic center.

The thread is that each of those projects — redeveloping the Boise Cascade site, redoing downtown parking and renovating the civic center — suffered from the same flaw: too little public involvement in the front end, which created big public opposition on the back end.

Last September, the outcry over a proposed road near Salem's Riverfront Carousel caused the Boise Cascade developers to scuttle their planned apartments next to Riverfront Park. To their credit, Mountain West Investment Corp. and city officials gradually worked out a compromise and a scaled-down project is under way, without those apartments.

Meanwhile, an intense public reaction has forced the city to remove almost-all downtown parking restrictions. And public opposition has mounted toward a new police headquarters at the Vern Miller Civic Center.

I happen to agree with the city's downtown parking-meter and civic center proposals. But that is beside the point. The end does not justify the means.

And though civic leaders may to bill Salem as the City of Collaboration, it too often resembles the City of Contention.

How does this happen? Here is why:

- Oregonians expect to be involved in public decisions. They want to be heard. That is as Oregon-ish as eschewing umbrellas or wearing socks with sandals.
- A lot of Salem residents have time on their hands to pack public hearings with their arguments. Good for them, but others — the parents and others who seemingly do not have time to attend government meetings — should be represented as well.
- It is human nature for people to only pay attention once they recognize the potential impact on them.
- Meeting agendas often are undecipherable, and thus irrelevant, to the layperson.

For example, the Feb. 24 Salem City Council agenda included references to upcoming hearings on “Ordinance Bill No. 31-13 Amendments to the Salem Revised Code Adopting Remaining Chapters of Unified Development Code” and to “Exemption from Competitive Bidding Requirement — Improvement Related to the P25 Compliant 800 MHZ Trunked Radio System Project.”

- Government operates on an outmoded concept of public involvement.

I reached that conclusion years ago when watching school officials propose changes in school attendance boundaries. They would mail letters, send notices home with students, and hold public forums. Then they

would be stunned when opponents came out in droves after the boundaries were almost finalized.

And the next time, that process would repeat itself.

It is easy to blame the public for not getting involved sooner. But such criticism represents backward thinking. Effective leaders insist on finding effective ways to involve the public. They take responsibility. They overcome the inertia of human nature.

It strikes me that such forward thinking must include these elements:

- Leaders with strong emotional intelligence, who accurately understand how they and others are perceived within the organization or the community. (By the way, “leaders” includes community activists and other informal leaders.)

Such leaders don’t try to control the final outcome.

- A commitment to communicating in real-person language, not bureaucratese. Effective leaders demand that meeting notices, agendas and staff reports are written in clear, non-obscuring language that anyone with a high school education can understand.

- A commitment to significant public involvement early on.

In the case of Salem’s proposed downtown parking meters, the city task force recommendation came across to the public as a done deal, regardless of what officials said.

In addition, task force members implied that their recommendation obviously represented the best-possible solution because they had spent so much time studying the issue. But that is a fallacy of logic. If you travel the wrong road, you won’t arrive at the right destination regardless of how long you spend on that road.

- A commitment to recruiting, not simply encouraging, public involvement. In the spirit of “keep your friends close and your enemies closer,” it also is essential to involve the potential opponents.

Public notices, mailings, robo-calls and emails are good strategies but inadequate by themselves. Savvy leaders accurately discern the target audience — who will be affected — and find creative ways to reach it.

I’m not an audience-engagement expert. Whole firms specialize in that area; they are worthwhile investments *if* they do their work well.

But such strategies might include: identifying unofficial neighborhood leaders and personally asking them to solicit pro-and-con feedback; scheduling forums at times and non-traditional places convenient to the target audience; asking churches, service clubs and other groups to spread the word through their newsletters; hosting online chats; tapping the expertise of high school or college classes, so students can put their coursework into action; and conducting pilot testing to see which strategies work best.

Granted, such approaches consume time, cost money and require creativity.

However, I would bet they're cheaper than the common alternative: watching public opposition derail a good project at the last minute.

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