

EAST OF THE RIVER AND ALL BUT NEGLECTED

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Maybe it's the old Royal Hotel, or the vast empty parking lots with their Willamette River views. Maybe it's City Liquidators, your one-stop shopping center for white-elephant gifts, or the bruised and battered warehouses flanking the Hawthorne Bridge.

Somewhere in this "industrial" wasteland, there must be a civic monument, some diamond in the rough, that keeps the Eastbank freeway on the river, block after block of prime real estate in disrepair, and any plan to re-energize the Central Eastside in a state of suspended animation.

A year after Vera Katz, in her last State of the City speech as mayor of Portland, tried to inspire her successor toward progressive thinking on the Central Eastside, her creative ideas have disappeared into the cavernous basement that is Tom Potter's "visioning" process.

So have the final recommendations of the Freeway Loop Advisory Group, an assembly chaired by Nohad Toulan, the founder of Portland State's school of urban studies.

That group concluded that "Interstate 5, between the Marquam Bridge's west ramps and the entire Interstate 5/84 interchange, requires fundamental change. The segment's poor transportation performance includes high accident rates, heavy congestion and incomplete interchanges. The segment also creates a significant barrier between eastside neighborhoods and the Willamette River, and creates environmental impacts at the river's edge."

That conclusion has drawn yawns from the City Council, a quintet, I'd wager, that still believes removing the traffic lights on Oregon 217 was an idea 50 years ahead of its time.

No one has taken Vera's baton. No one considers transportation or land use worthy of a public forum. The status quo is inviolate. On the west, those Byzantine loops from I-5 to the Ross Island Bridge. On the east, the missing on-ramp from the business district to the interstate's southbound lanes.

That frightening disparity between land value and job opportunities on opposite sides of the river. The 198 city blocks that are bordered by the river, Southeast Seventh, OMSI and the Banfield --and hamstrung by the Eastbank freeway --boasted 2,600 jobs and a land value of \$93 million in 2000.

The corresponding 198 blocks on the west side of the Willamette counted 12,000 jobs and a land value of \$525 million. The assessed value of the buildings on the west side was eight times that of its industrial eastside shadow.

I suppose that's great news for the low-rent set, but does it make sense for the city? Who decided that construction crews and innovative developments work only on the west side of the river?

Not Riverfront for People, that's for sure. That group, which included George Crandall, Ron Buel, Ernie Bonner and Graham Clark, worked for years on a plan that featured tunneling I-5 beneath the Willamette and Grand Avenue, new rail stations on both sides of the river, affordable downtown housing, capping several freeways and --given the expiration date on our endless supply of oil --additional light-rail lines to Damascus, Oregon City and Tigard.

The price tag on that drastic redesign of I-5 might be \$1 billion per mile, said Randy Miller, chairman of the Moore Co. and a participant in the Freeway Loop Advisory Group, which is why he argues, "I don't see it in our lifetimes." Federal highway dollars arrive in buckets the state must allocate, and many in the state feel Portland already gets more than it deserves.

But someone at City Hall needs to get behind a fundamental transformation of the river's east bank, even if that's a 30-year mission. We have plenty of vintage photographs of Portland from the 1950s. There's no reason for the Central Eastside, year after year, to hold that pose.