

## The Vision Thing

by Jeff Ward, IFRR President



As the election filing week begins in Kootenai County we begin to look at the upcoming races. Before the specifics of the campaigns begin, we can step back and look at the "big picture." What does this election, specifically the Coeur d'Alene City election, mean from a distance? From my perspective the real contest in this election is the battle between two distinct and very different visions for the future of the city.

In one corner is the small but influential group of land owners and real estate developers, commercial builders, the downtown retail and hospitality businesses and the service businesses dependent on them. Allied with highly-compensated city top bureaucrats and political activists who seek to expand the size and scope of government (i.e. Democrats) this group has ruled the roost in Coeur d'Alene, using city government and its urban renewal agency to advance their own specific "vision."

This group's core vision for Coeur d'Alene seems to be focused on economic development through tourism, influx of the wealthy property buyers and increased commercial property values. The system they have executed is simple: dedicate public resources via city and urban development tax dollars to create a series of expensive public projects and liberal social policies, all used as flypaper to attract tourists and sell vacation homes and condos to the wealthy. Because Peter is robbed to pay Paul, the diversion of funds leads to increased taxes and insufficient neighborhood services and infrastructure. But the promise made to the people is that due to increased property values (from the influx of outside cash) tax revenues will increase and in the long run pay for the belated services and infrastructure. The challenge to this machine (despite strong coordination of public relations and allied groups) is that the public has been resistant to the completely "Downtown-focused" future vision they promote for the city. The city has done its best to stonewall dissent, deny the voters any opportunity to weigh in on issues, and ridicule anyone who does not buy-in to their specific "Downtown-centric" vision.

The trickle-down of tax revenues from this system has never materialized. In fact the "Great North Idaho Real Estate Bubble" of a few years ago, that wreaked havoc on average home owner was in part of result of this economic policy. By successfully boosting the profile of high-end vacation homes, luxury condominiums and their supporting commercial real estate, there was an increase in upper market values which moved the needle on the entire county, making it look like the hottest real estate market in the country. When a million dollar condo's value jumps to \$1.4 million in a short period of time, and the same neighborhood's five single family homes stay flat at \$200,000, in the aggregate it looks like the neighborhood's values went up 20%, creating a perceived white-hot market. The same misconception happened on a large scale in Kootenai County. Outside investors poured in, buying up the housing stock, pricing out locals and increasing existing home owners taxes due to increased valuations. Government then spent the increased revenue on even more goodies to attract more investors. When the market finally realized the local economy and local rental market could not sustain the ridiculously high prices, the walls inevitably came tumbling down, with the loss born by the homeowners and taxpayers, especially new homeowners who bought at the bubble's height.

Despite this monumental system failure, government in Coeur d'Alene has arrogantly continued to chase the outside dollar with taxpayer funded "bait." From the public coffers come an expensive urban park equipped with hippest art and amusements to attract well-heeled condo buyers with publicly paid-for views and a free green backyard sanitized of grubby adolescent baseball players and beer-swilling blue-collar weekend boaters (i.e. residents of Coeur d'Alene.) They use taxpayer money for a parking garage for thick-walleted tourists to park and hand over that California green to downtown shops, restaurants and hotels. Even the city's much-discussed gay rights ordinance was really a cynical public relations ploy to assure potential conferences and conventions, bringing their big money, that Coeur d'Alene was a "tolerant" city.

There is one big problem for this vision - it does not include the vast majority of Couer d'Aleneians who live and work outside the few blocks of Downtown. That is why the politicians who have forced this vision on the people of the city are now, with a single exception, abandoning the sinking electoral ship. They now try to give the wheel to those who will stay the course. If they have their way, a Director of the Downtown Association, "Downtown Steve" Widmyer will be the next Mayor and downtown cheerleaders

Kiki Miller and Amy Evans will join "Get-along Go-along" Woody McEvers on the council. First by fighting the attempt to hold the politicians accountable by recall, and now by themselves seeking those politicians' abandoned seats, this slate seems dedicated to pursuing this failed vision by using the people's money for unessential projects and high bureaucrat salaries over the taxpayers' strenuous objections. Those who financially benefit from this tax-funded money machine and share their vision will no doubt bring almost unlimited resources to keep the failed system in place.

In the other corner of this contest are those who realize that there is more to Coeur d'Alene than "Downtown." It is a city of neighborhoods, families, churches and small businesses. It is a city of people who make things, provide services, raise their families, help people, and put a little aside for their retirements. It is a city of people who believe in both value and values; who believe in investment not speculation; who earn dollars not chase them; who pay as they go and who do not seek to indebt future generations for their immediate gain. In future weeks I will talk more about the candidates, who like Reagan Republican-endorsed Mayoral candidate Mary Souza have a vision for Couer d'Alene that is based on its people and its families and not on a vision that excludes them from the city's future. It is a vision of this community based on the great strengths of Coeur d'Alene and not one continuing to bulldoze its essential human character and turning this city into another Malibu or a Newport Beach populated with pine instead of palm trees.