

A Town Squared

COVER
STORY

A new idea inflames an already heated debate over whether, and where, a downtown plaza belongs

Pacific Ave

BT 3.15.01

by Jim Johnson
photos Stephen Laufer

When longtime Santa Cruzans allow themselves the luxury of pre-quake nostalgia, memories of the Pacific Garden Mall and its little informal outdoor gathering places inevitably flit through their wistful reminiscences. There was the Cooper House where everyone sat and rapped, dreamed and listened as the sounds of Warmth wafted through the air. There was the mini-plaza in front of the old Bookshop Santa Cruz store (where Asian Rose is now), where people sat for hours and read their books and newspapers. There was a certain languid, friendly pace to life on Pacific Avenue in those days.

For more than a decade, a few interested people have been trying to recapture a little of that bygone languor, that neighborly, small-town community feeling that once permeated downtown Santa Cruz. For years, they've been asking for a special place to rest, just away from the hustle and jive of the busy street, which has become a bustling center of retail and commerce and office space. They want a town square, a centerpiece, and they want it in the middle of everything. They want a downtown plaza.

A bevy of downtown plaza proposals have sprung up over the years. They include: the old Cooper House site; the last vacant lot on Pacific Avenue at Church Street; the old Bookshop Santa Cruz spot; along the River Walk across from the Metro station; and even an area in the middle of Pacific Avenue between Cooper and Locust streets — the latest

proposal submitted by Aptos developer Robert Fish.

Architect Hugh Carter was at the center of much of the early talk about downtown plazas. Immediately after the '89 quake, Carter coordinated the local Architects Association effort to redesign downtown. A plaza was part of the discussion.

since the Cooper House was demolished only months after the quake. Initially, Bratton backed the idea of a plaza on the original Cooper House site. But the fervor of rebuilding downtown didn't translate into any progress on a plaza and Bratton watched the potential for a true, centrally located downtown plaza on Pacific

"Everybody agreed that we really blew it — people talked about it but nothing ever happened," Bratton said. "But it also accentuated the necessity of getting a plaza across the street (at Church and Pacific)."

Bratton and the Downtown Plaza Committee face more than just apathy. Church



Closing Pacific Avenue at Locust Street for a half-block to form a plaza has been proposed by Robert Fish. Although opponents say the site doesn't get enough sun, it would be relatively easy to create.

"People want a place downtown to gather — a square or piazza, whatever," he said. "Ever after, that has been in my mind and in the minds of others."

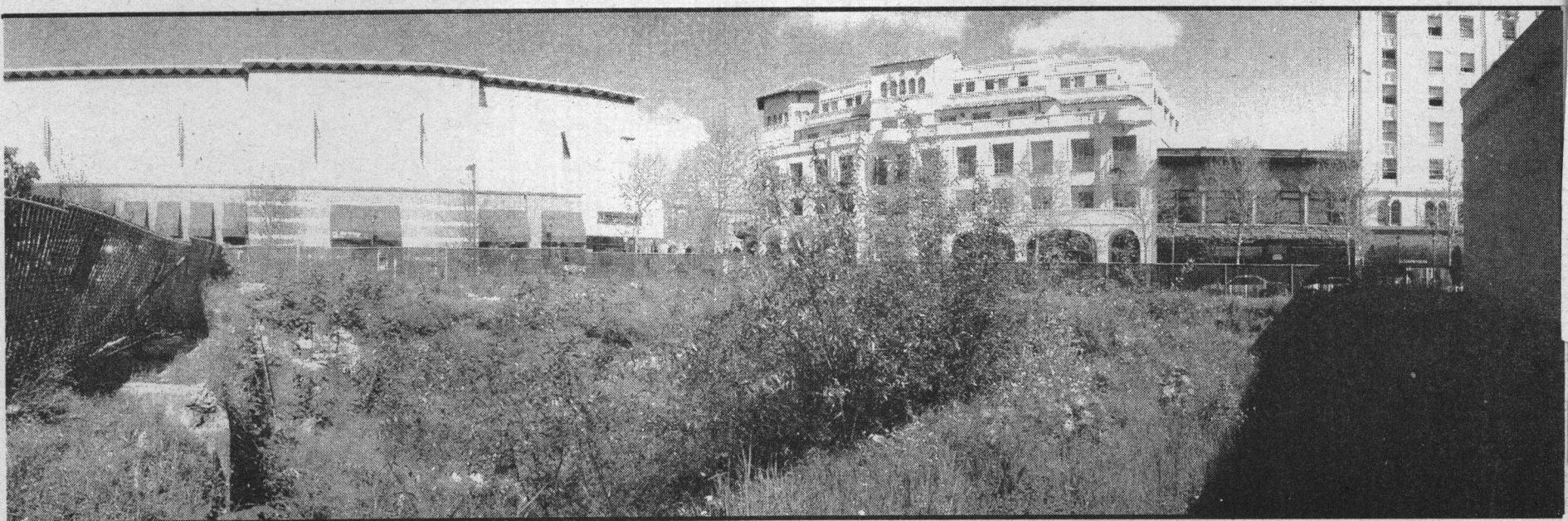
Carter is now backing the Church and Pacific location for a plaza.

The Cooper House and the Last Vacant Lot

Community activist Bruce Bratton has supported the idea of a downtown plaza

Avenue fade with every large building that went up along the city's most vital thoroughway. One by one, each of the vacant lots was filled, including the old Cooper House site. By the time the University Town Center was built at the corner of Cathcart and Pacific in 1999, there was only one empty lot left — at Church and Pacific. Bratton is determined to not let the same malaise that doomed the Cooper House site as a plaza possibility grind the Church and Pacific site into the dust of Santa Cruz history.

and Pacific property owner Louie Rittenhouse, a native Santa Cruzan whose family has been here for generations, has vowed that no plaza will ever be built on the site; his plans are for a retail/office space structure. After being rebuffed by city planners last year, Rittenhouse submitted new plans for a scaled-down, four-story building with numerous concessions, including a recessed fourth floor to allow more sun onto Pacific Avenue, and a smaller overall structure than other post-earthquake buildings. And he's looking

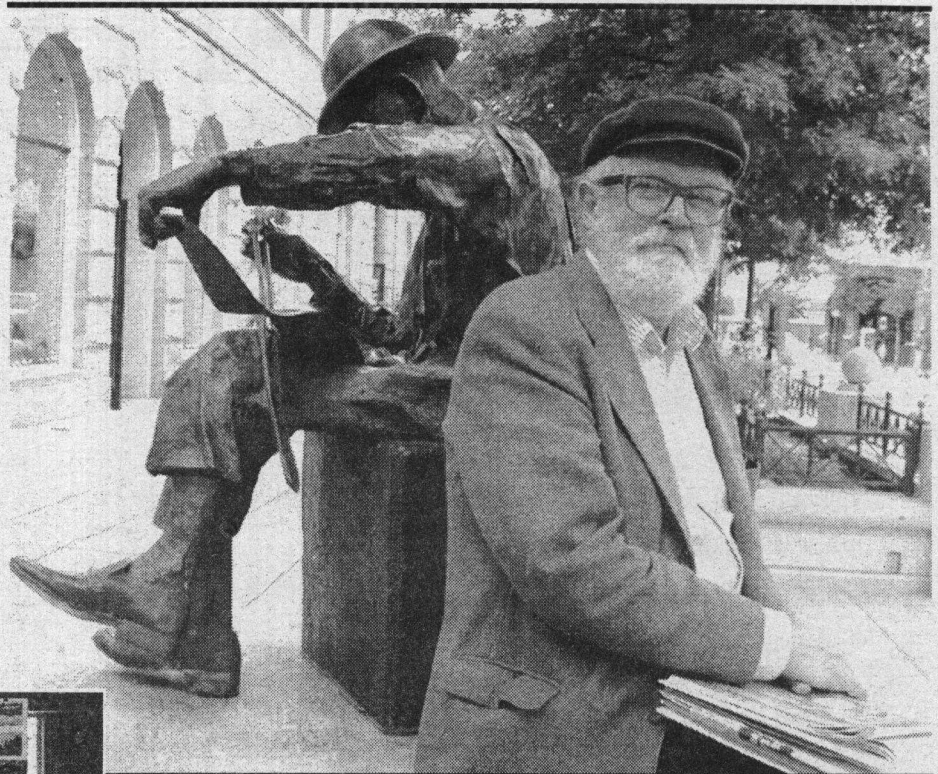


The premier site for most plaza supporters is the large vacant lot at the corner of Pacific and Church. The land is privately owned by Louie Rittenhouse, who currently has plans before the City Planning Department for a four-story building comprised of retail and office space.

Bratton is determined to not let the same malaise that doomed the Cooper House site as a plaza possibility grind the Church and Pacific site into the dust of Santa Cruz history.

a major tenant, perhaps a department store, to anchor the building. Then, last month, Fish submitted his downtown plaza plan to close off a small section of Pacific Avenue between Cooper and Locust, giving people another option. Bratton responded by saying the Downtown Plaza Committee is adamant that Church and Pacific is the only suitable location for a plaza. He steadfastly refuses to consider other options, calling them inadequate and inappropriate. The Downtown Plaza Committee is

two-story café and retail building along the southwest border and could include a fountain, a bandstand and public art. Carter said his plan would keep the plaza vital and busy, leaving no room for what he said opponents and business people call the "wrong element" to squat.



Writer Bruce Bratton (above) has been one of the most vocal about the benefits of a plaza for our community. He staunchly supports the Pacific and Church site.



Santa Cruz architect Hugh Carter (pictured above) along with architect Miguel H. Podolsky and landscape architect Tom Scherer prepared a great deal of materials in the study of a downtown plaza. Carter stresses that their plans and drawings were intended to be conceptual renderings.

interested in that corner lot," Bratton said. "There have been a lot of efforts to persuade us from that focus. But we were, and we still are, focused on that site. It's where the action is. It's in the middle of things. It's on the way to things — the movies, the shops, the parking garages. From what we've seen and studied, a plaza needs to be on the way to something."

Carter's conceptual drawing and explanation of the potential Church and Pacific plaza, which he emphasizes is a permeable plan, shows a tree-lined plaza bordered by benches on Church and Pacific against a backdrop of two buildings. The plan calls for a hardscape design for easy maintenance and flexibility for use as a performing arts space or exhibition location: The proposal includes a

"This really becomes the outdoor living room for the downtown," said Carter. "People stop and have a coffee or a drink. And it's not a site that was casually selected. Location isn't everything but a bad site can't be fixed. It's really an ideal location. It's a great mix of travel paths."

Is There Support for a Plaza?

Bratton said support for a downtown plaza has been strong from people on the street. An informal survey downtown picked up 3,000 signatures in support of the idea in a few hours, he said, adding that "People said, yeah, yeah, go for it."

While admitting that downtown business support for a plaza has been uneven at best, Bratton thinks they should be

behind the concept.

"Plazas work, economically and aesthetically," he said. "Studies have shown that property values go up around it. (Rittenhouse has) let that place sit there for 12 years. It's disgusting. Obviously, our downtown has succeeded without that space, so the notion that

downtown needs that space for business is suspect."

Bratton also pointed out that the last thing Pacific Avenue needs is another large building and that a plaza should be much more of a priority for the city, considering the dwindling possibilities.

"What we're really asking for is a feasibility study," Bratton said. "We just want them to look at it, give us an official study with official feedback. I've said, almost humorously, that we could do it in a few hours, take a few potted plants and a few benches and try it out. See what people think about it."

And, Bratton remains convinced that the idea is workable, despite evidence to the contrary. He said negotiations with Rittenhouse involving a trade of some sort, per-

haps for other city land or other concessions, could still work. If not, Bratton said the city should at least consider using its powers of eminent domain to acquire the property, despite the fact that there seems to be little support for that on the city council.

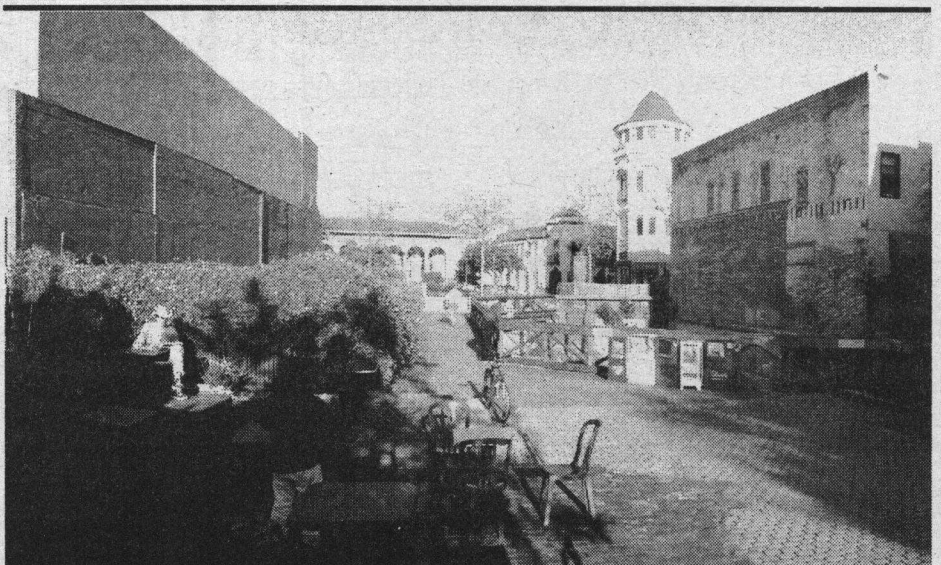
But Rittenhouse is diametrically opposed to a plaza on his property, or, indeed, a plaza anywhere on Pacific Avenue. He said it goes against the city's own plan.

"Pacific Avenue itself was designed as a plaza," Rittenhouse said. "The city plan was to create a huge plaza along the length of Pacific Avenue, not just one area. If you need more benches for people to rest on the other side of the street, put them in. We don't need a plaza. Few downtowns have been as successful as Santa Cruz."

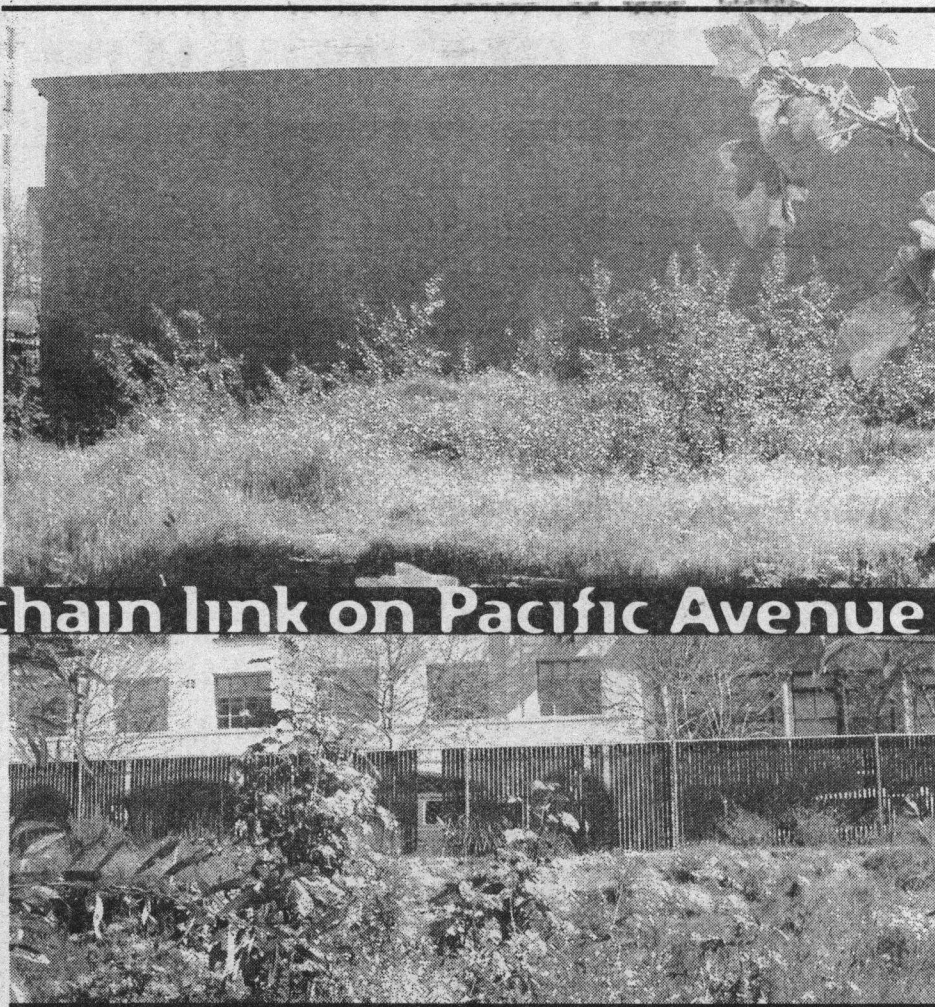
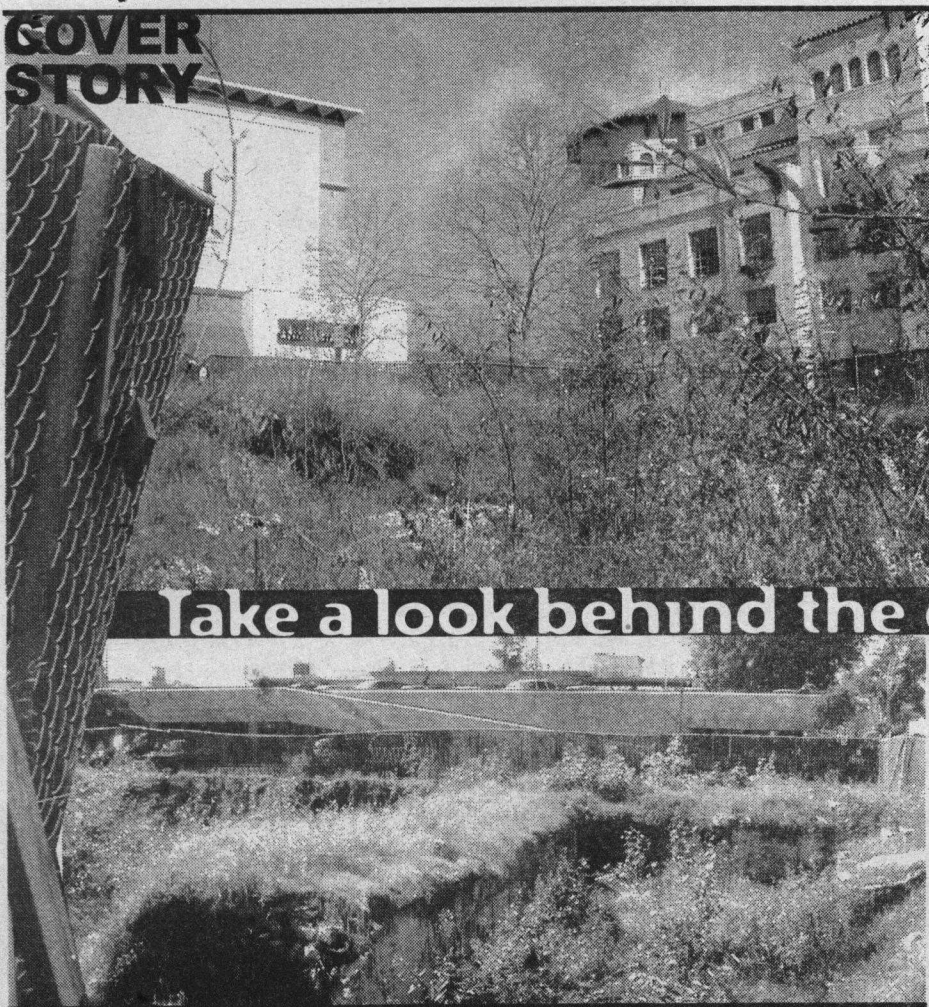
Downtown Association director Pete Eberle said it's time to be realistic about the chances for a downtown plaza, especially one at Church and Pacific.

"In theory, it seems like a great idea, but in reality it may not work," said Eberle. "Why a plaza? Is it for rest or activity? If it's activity, space is a consideration."

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Another open space on the mall is at the north end of Pacific Avenue (the old Bookshop Santa Cruz location). It has not been highly regarded for the plaza site because it is not centrally located.



Take a look behind the chain link on Pacific Avenue

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Large events just can't happen in a small space. With business people, some would want it and some wouldn't, but no one seems to want it in front of their front door. As for Church and Pacific, I think a little reality needs to strike — it's probably not going to happen."

Newest Plaza Proposal

While Fish agrees with Bratton that a downtown plaza should be on Pacific Avenue, he also thinks it's time to move on from the Church-and-Pacific concept. Fish proposed his plaza when he said it became obvious Rittenhouse wasn't giving up on his own plans for what is, after all, his property.

"I realized there wasn't the money for it, Rittenhouse just doesn't want to sell and eminent domain just isn't there as far as the political will on the council," said Fish. "It's time to start thinking about other possibilities."

Fish, who helped design the Museum of Art and History entryway and donated the adjacent Abbott Plaza fountain with his wife Sunny, said his proposal would make Pacific Avenue more visitor-friendly and also incorporate other elements of downtown with Pacific Avenue. His plan is to pave over a small portion of Pacific Avenue, from Cooper Street to Locust Street, bracketed by Noah's Bagels on one

side and Pacific Wave on the other. Fish said the city's work, including landscaping, adding benches and transforming Locust into a one-way street, would be minimal. Costs would be low, too, he said, because the city already owns the property and there would be no loss of parking spaces.

"The idea is to make downtown more of

"I think the council people are very open to it and interested in getting public comment," he said, adding that he believes plaza backers are a lot more flexible than Bratton says. "My feeling is the plaza committee will meet again soon to discuss this."

A larger alternative being proposed is closing down Cooper Street, along with

able to drive through them and see what's there before they park and shop."

Bratton said Fish's plaza would be drenched in shadow and gloom for most of the day because it runs almost due north and south, and because it's bracketed by large buildings.

"People would be out there shivering in the cold," he said. "It would make more sense to close off Church Street (near Cinema 9)."

But Fish's proposal has earned at least one influential supporter, city council member and architect Mark Primack.

"The area outlined in Bob Fish's plan is the perfect size for Santa Cruz," said Primack. "And, with three little barricades we could create a plaza and test it. There doesn't have to be any big studies."

Primack is unsure, though, whether the city even needs a plaza.

"I'm not convinced Santa Cruz can support a plaza," he said. "People say they want a European plaza like they have in Paris but are we Parisiens? Plazas in Europe work because people spend three hours a day there, while we spend three hours a day on the highway."

Like many things on the council's agenda, money becomes the primary concern.

"We need to figure out if we really need one or if it's just the politically correct thing to do," said Primack. "I hope we could use one, but I don't want the city to spend \$20 million finding out." ■



Yet another plaza alternative is closing Cooper Street and Pacific Avenue between Cooper and Locust Streets.

a living room instead of just businesses," Fish said. "Pacific Avenue now is just a long string of retail. Our larger vision is that Cooper Street would be another main street when the river walk is complete. It's more natural for people to walk from the river to the plaza."

The city is currently engaged in a river walk improvement project aimed at sprucing up the river area. A proposed plaza near the Metro center is being discussed as part of that plan.

Fish said a potential alternative to his plan could be using the space on Pacific Avenue between Cinema 9 and the Cooper Street building, but he prefers the first option.

Pacific Avenue from Locust to Church, thereby creating a T-shaped area. This proposal would tie the Museum of Art and History to Pacific Avenue in front of the movie theater.

Ironically, Fish's plan may be one of the only things that Bratton and Rittenhouse agree on. Not surprisingly, both hate it.

Rittenhouse said Fish's plaza would cut off a valuable entryway onto Pacific Avenue, a traffic directional change that would thwart the whole downtown redesign of its traffic pattern.

"The closed mall concept did not work," Rittenhouse said. "These days, cities are putting streets back in. People want to be

PLAZAability?