

Clackamas Town Center vital from the beginning

By Mark Hurlburt



Clackamas Town Center Ice Rink, c. 1981

Courtesy: Clackamas County Historical Society

Clackamas Town Center got its start from the vision of Ernest W. Hahn, a southern California developer and shopping center magnate. Hahn had succeeded and failed to build other major shopping malls in California, Washington and New Mexico as he faced legal challenges from residents and environmentalists.¹ In the early 1970's, he set his sights on undeveloped land in a small residential area between Milwaukie and Happy Valley. It was an open field with blackberry bushes and scrub brush and on the southern side of Sunnyside Road were residential houses.² The land he envisioned for a mall was owned by the North Clackamas School District. The site was designated for a fourth high school after Milwaukie, Rex Putnam and Clackamas. But after voters rejected proposals by the school district to finance construction of another high school, the school board elected to sell the property in 1973 for \$805,000 to Coldwell Banker, whose chairman, Hahn, planned to build a shopping center. Surrounding acreage would also be purchased for the project. The school district also rejected a competing bid from Fred Meyer.³

Completion was originally set for 1976, but construction of the Town Center faced several delays due to regulatory requirements, challenges to zoning approval, and protests.⁴ Clackamas Town Center's comprehensive plan was proposed by Hahn's California based development firm. The proposal was supported by the County Planning Commission, Milwaukie City Council, North Clackamas Chamber of Commerce, and the North Clackamas Citizens Committee. They believed the center would provide jobs, tax benefits, convenient shopping, promote orderly development and discourage strip commercial growth in the area. Opponents of the plan included the South of Sunnyside Neighborhood League, Tri-County New Politics, and the Oregon Environmental Council. They argued the mall would increase noise, traffic, pollution, and add to economic problems for existing shopping stores.⁵ The North Clackamas School Board supported the proposed Town Center because it believed the mall would have a positive impact on the characteristics of the 82nd Avenue corridor and the area east of I-205 and would generate

additional tax revenues. A poll of Happy Valley residents, who notably enjoyed living in a rural, residential setting, narrowly supported the project, 118 in favor and 102 opposed.⁶

A comprehensive plan to allow development of the Town Center was approved by the Clackamas County Board of Commissioners in 1975 in a 2-1 decision. Commissioner Stan Skoko approved the Town Center request on the basis that it would discourage strip zoning development, improve transit, and provide job opportunities to North Clackamas residents and significant economic benefits to the county. Board Chairman Tom Telford agreed with Skoko to approve the Town Center request. Commissioner Robert Schumacher voted against it because he did not know the overall impact on people living about half a mile away from the site.⁷ Town Center development received approval from the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality in 1976 and authorized 6,500 parking spaces to be created. The DEQ listed a number of requirements for its approval, included providing mass transit, bus shelters, and widening and improving the roads surrounding the site.⁸ While Hahn's development firm was getting the necessary approvals, the South of Sunnyside Neighborhood League won a legal battle with an Oregon Supreme Court ruling that the Town Center didn't conform to Clackamas County's comprehensive land-use plan. The County then revised its plan and rezoned the site and the neighborhood for commercial development. Soon the Sunnyside residents moved away and the Clackamas Promenade, across from the Town Center, was built.⁹



Center Court, c. 2003

Courtesy: Clackamas County Historical Society

County planners hoped the Hahn project would serve a role beyond just a shopping mall but as the center of a highly developed, urban community.¹⁰ After all of its legal delays, Clackamas Town Center finally opened on March 6, 1981. Architect John Graham and Company of Seattle designed the \$125 million shopping mall and it opened with one million square feet of retail space, making it one of the largest shopping centers in the state. The first five anchor stores were JC Penney, Meier and Frank, Nordstrom, Sears, and Montgomery Ward.¹¹ Among its unique features were a Clackamas County branch library, a five-screen theater, three towering wood-sculpted cedar trees, community meeting rooms, and an Olympic-sized ice skating rink.¹²

Since the mall's opening, it has seen several new beginnings through remodels. The library, which was located in a nook near the rink, closed in 1996 and relocated northeast of the Town Center.¹³ The ice rink received national attention when Tonya Harding practiced there during her career and when it was remodeled as the Dorothy Hamill Skating Centre in 1994. The famous ice rink, which provided the perfect entertainment for visitors dining in the surrounding food court, closed in 2003 due to operational expenses and competition from other rinks.¹⁴ The three cedar sculptures, each more than thirty feet in height, were removed in 2004 as part of a \$100 million makeover of the mall.¹⁵ On September 12, 2009 the Town Center provided a vital link in transportation when the first MAX Light Rail Line to extend into Clackamas County, the Green Line, opened.¹⁶ Clackamas Town Center received national attention in 2012 when a shooting rampage took the lives of Cindy Ann Yuille and Steven Forsyth.¹⁷ The Town Center sign along Sunnyside Road became a memorial to the victims after the tragedy, one that still affects locals today. After the November 2018 closure of Sears and the 2001 bankruptcy of Montgomery Ward, two of the original anchor tenants remain, with Meier & Frank replaced by Macy's. Despite all the changes, Clackamas Town Center has maintained its reputation from the beginning as a vital part of the local community.

Mark Hurlburt is a lifelong Happy Valley resident and the volunteer librarian in the Wilmer Gardner Research Library at the Museum of the Oregon Territory.

References

1. Chuck Idelson, *Clackamas Review*, April 16, 1975.
2. Dennis McCarthy, *Oregonian*, January 26, 1995.
3. *Oregonian*, September 13, 1973.
4. *Oregonian*, August 22, 1973.
5. "Clackamas Town Center Hearing Due on Development," *Oregonian*, January 20, 1975.
6. *Clackamas Review*, September 25, 1974.
7. *Oregonian*, March 18, 1975; Peter Toll, *Clackamas Review*, March 19, 1975.
8. *Oregonian*, October 19, 1976.
9. Dennis McCarthy, *Oregonian*, January 26, 1995.
10. Terry McDermott, *Oregon Journal*, July 8, 1980.
11. "Town Center heralds new lifestyle for area residents," *Oregonian*, March 6, 1981;
"Town Center Work to Begin," *Oregonian*, October 19, 1976.
12. Fran Jones, *Oregonian*, August 12, 1980; Clackamas Town Center Grand Opening
Newspaper, Supplement to the *Oregonian*, March 5, 1981.
13. Kate Taylor, "Library Bids Fond Adieu to Town Center," *Oregonian*, March 15, 1996.
14. Melissa L. Jones, "Skaters take one last spin around Clackamas Ice Rink," *Oregonian*,
April 20, 2003.
15. Dennis McCarthy, *Oregonian*, June 11, 2004.
16. "Thousands on MAX go Green Festivities and free rides draw takers for the new
downtown- Clackamas Town Center line." *Oregonian*, 13 September 2009.
17. Bella, Rick. "It was terrifying." *Oregonian*, 12 December 2012.