

50 years ago
Operation 4-Sight set in motion an historic process that changed
the face of Downtown Camas.

Prepared by: Randy Curtis, DCA Board Member (Feb. 22, 2016)

The following statement appears in the 2004 City Comprehensive Plan, in the chapter relating to Downtown Camas.

“In 1962, community leaders from the Camas-Washougal Chamber of Commerce began Operation -4-Sight, which included promoting the modernization of the downtown This effort resulted in the completion of Phase I of the downtown Camas Shopping Park in 1966”

What was Operation 4-Sight and how did it influence the redevelopment of Downtown Camas? Who were the key leaders involved in the process and what was their inspiration? What was the process they followed and how did they gain public approval?

Curiosity to answer these questions took me to the library, the Post Record archives, the Chamber of Commerce and Two Rivers Heritage Museum. The Post Record archives proved the best resource for stories about the people involved and the timeline for major events. Between 1963 and 1967 the Post Record produced over 40 articles about Operation 4-Sight and the Commercial Shopping Park. The details I gathered from those articles brought me full circle back to the Chamber of Commerce where Brent Erickson was able to find an original copy of the Chamber’s report.

The following information was taken from the Operation 4 Sight report. The bolded headings and much of the information listed below came directly from the report. The date of the report was October 28, 1966, an important date that will be discussed later.

WE KNEW WE HAD A PROBLEM - - - - The population of Camas was about 6,000. The downtown business district “just grew from pioneer days,” without real planning. Under the leadership of Chamber president, Tom Blair, the Commercial Problems committee was created. The committee was chaired by Glenn Farrell. Their focus was about how to make the downtown more attractive by retaining old customers and bringing in new customers. They conducted a “trade survey” that focused on changes that could be made to a four city block area along 4th Ave. The answers to the survey pointed to a whole new approach to the downtown shopping problem. “People were asking for a HUGE SHOPPING CENTER RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE CITY”.

WE LOOKED LONG AND HARD FOR ANSWERS - - - - - The idea of a downtown shopping park was first inspired by a May, 1962 article in Western Cities magazine about Grand Junction Colorado. Grand Junction had transformed their downtown with an “innovation on the shopping mall concept.” The project was called “Operation Foresight and resulted in Grand Junction receiving the All American City designation. It was a joint project between the Chamber of Commerce and the city that “minimized the disadvantages of a complete mall by allowing traffic access and limited parking in the area. The pedestrian was given priority.”

Dr. Thomas Williams, a Camas dentist and member of the Commercial Problems Committee, visited Grand Junction and came back “filled with enthusiasm and ideas. “Why” He said, “can’t we do the same thing?”

And thus was born Operation 4-Sight. The tentative plan contained four phases.

1. Downtown Shopping Park
2. Off-street Parking
3. Beautification of Business Buildings
4. All-weather marquees

SOLD OUR IDEA TO CITY HALL - - - - - Since the Chamber had no legal means to implement this plan, they had to sell the city officials of Camas on the plan. They had to “convince them that the business district – and the whole city would benefit by modernization of four blocks of downtown Camas.” “The selling job was accomplished the same way business people make a sale of merchandise.” “They had to convince the mayor (Willard T. Sampson) and city council that a shopping park was needed and should be accepted in competition with hundreds of other types of city projects.” After many meetings and discussions, the city agreed to join Operation 4-Sight – “a modern approach to an old problem.”

Note: Articles from the Post Record (1964 – 67) revealed that Camas was experiencing many changes that would impact the growth of the city for decades to come. These include:

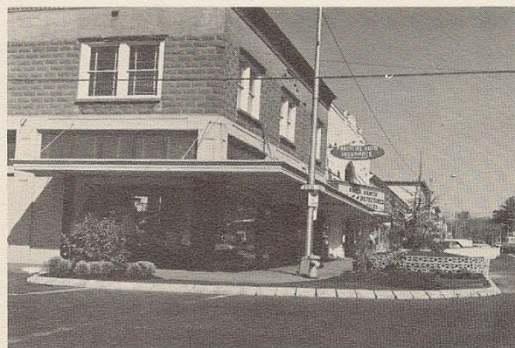
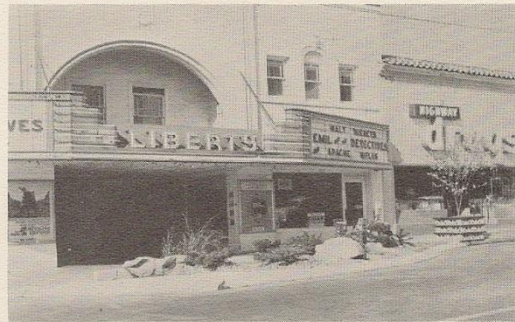
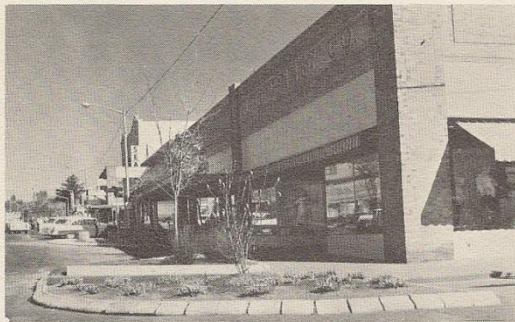
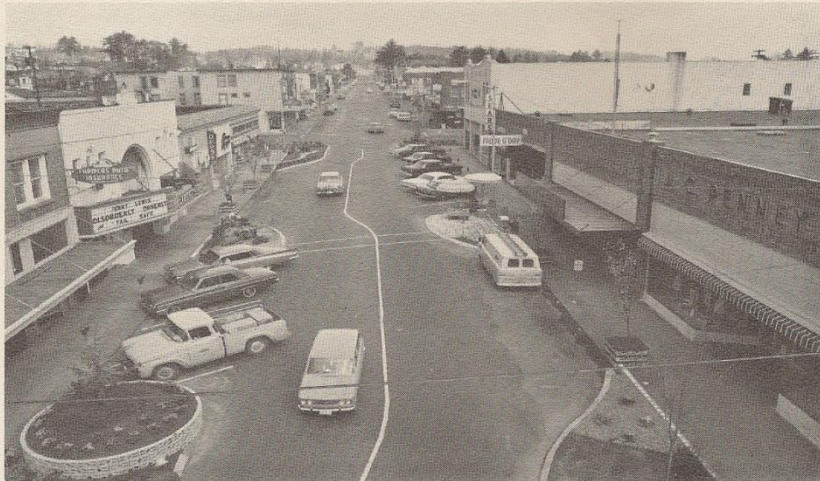
- Building a new City Hall and expanded library
- Approval of the new Safeway store
- Completion of the Hwy 14 by-pass
- Widening of 3rd Street to 4-lanes
- Final approval of the I-205 freeway and bridge location

It seems that Operation 4-Sight was in tune with the desire to build a quality community. These sentiments were expressed in a Post Record editorial about the project.

“Camas has been a quality city for years As city officials and land owners prepare for the proposed downtown shopping park Let’s be sure it’s top quality so it will offer a pleasing appearance for a long time to come.”

TAKING OUR CASE TO THE PEOPLE - - - - In March of 1965, the Chamber and city officials brought in concrete blocks, dirt, sawdust and rocks to build a mockup of the proposed shopping park design features. It was constructed on 4th Ave. between Birch and Cedar Streets. The city invested about \$1,000 to help construct the test area. Clark County PUD installed 5 street lights with special 1,000 watt color oriented lights. The mock-up was up for 6-weeks and the public was asked to evaluate the project. Public support was overwhelming. By more than a 3 to 1 margin, the shopping park concept was endorsed.

Preliminary Mock Up



FIND THE BEST WAY TO PAY FOR IT - - - - - In concert with the city, cost estimates were developed and a financing plan was developed. The estimated construction cost was \$59,000. Property owners would be assessed \$48,000 through the creation of a Local Improvement District (LID) and the city would pay \$11,000. More than 80% of the affected property owners signed the LID petition in support of the project. An architectural firm was hired to draw final plans and call for bids.

Everything looked great, but then “Gloom settled in when the bids were opened on May 19, 1966 and the lowest bid was more than \$133,000.” “The Camas downtown shopping park looked as dead as the proverbial dodo.”

BUT WE CUT IT TO THE BONE - - - - - City officials and committee members worked with their consultants and pared the project to \$68,000 with a provision that additional street and beautification work could be done in the future with a possible federal grant. By the fall of 1966 the project was underway. A federal grant was received in the amount of \$20,500. It was part of the HUD National Beautification Project and was the first grant of its kind to be received by a Washington city.

The committee’s report ends at this point and reflects back on what can be done when City Officials and the Chamber work together.

But, the story doesn’t end here: Word of the innovative Camas project was spreading across the northwest. The city had received numerous inquiries from Chambers and cities in the region. In late October, the city hosted a luncheon and tour for over 100 officials representing 20 Northwest cities who came to Camas to study this cities Operation 4-Sight. The representatives came from cities like Roseburg, Eugene, Salem, Portland, Lake Oswego Beaverton, Vancouver, Clarkston, Centralia, Kelso and Goldendale. Many of the visiting officials said they came to Camas to learn how to get such a program “on the move.”

Commentary: The city comprehensive plan notes that phases (II-IV) were never completed. However, it would be more accurate to say that those phases were long term and are continually being addressed as new development and renovation occurs along 4th Ave. and on the adjacent blocks that make up the Downtown District. Challenges and opportunities still remain, but are being addressed through the Downtown Design Manual and revisions to the City’s comprehensive plan and zoning standards.

The process of transforming the old business district into a modern commercial shopping park is a classic illustration of problem solving. Camas was a quality community with all the typical challenges and opportunities that cities face today. Under the right leadership, vision and

passion, citizens and government officials were inspired to collaborate on a downtown project that Camas citizens are still enjoying 50 years later.

The following editorial from May 24, 1967 sums it best:

