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Bopf, Bill Oral History Interview: General Holland History

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Narration/Interview

City Manager Report, Proposed Downtown Beautification Project

Interviewee: Bill Bopf

Interviewer: Len (last name unknown)

February 6 [1973]

Abstract: Bill Bopf, Holland City Manager, River Avenue bridge, new parking lots, beautification, downtown development, renovation of storefronts, one way traffic patterns, city swimming pool.

Len: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome once again to our City Manager's Report, and with me today in the second floor office of Holland City Manager Bill Bopf, is the City Manager. Yesterday, Bill, you spoke before the Downtown Merchants Association at a noon luncheon meeting at the hotel, and at that meeting you presented a proposed beautification program for the downtown area. Would you care to expand on that and what essentially you told the merchants?

BB: Well, Len, we presented a proposal to them, which was a sketch schematic of what we hoped that they would adopt. We are going to have another meeting on the twelfth of February, and that'll be a Monday evening as well, and that's open to anybody that's interested to come to that meeting, and that will be down in the Tulip Room in Warm Friend. We hope that we have fifty to a hundred, hundred and fifty people at the meeting. Certainly we would like everybody in the downtown business community that is interested to come to that meeting. We're going to basically replay what we mentioned at this meeting yesterday. Getting into the meat of this, the council has, over the past two years, embarked on a program of making a commitment downtown. The first commitment was to develop the one way street system, which has been done, and it required a number of intersection modifications, new signalization, and things to aid the traffic flow. In conjunction with that, the Road Commission did a study with traffic

signals along River Avenue up through their portion of the city out in Howard, and determined that they could re-synchronize their signals. We turned off the one at Van Bragt area and, consequently, they were able to expedite the traffic movement substantially through there. I would say that the complaints we used to receive about the bridge have almost subsided completely. It looks like we've gotten quite a bit more mileage from the bridge, and will have for the next several years because of those changes. This will help the north/south traffic, and that's good. In addition, a little bit different from that but in the same vein, we're going to plan on re-decking that bridge. This is something we'll have to work in conjunction with the Road Commission, as well. It would be a fifty-fifty cost splitting on that, and we plan on putting that in our budget, and hopefully they will too, so we can get that done this summer.

Len: It is in kind of bad shape, isn't it?

BB: Yes it is. The bridge core, or the deck, is in bad shape, and the Road Commission is evaluating that bridge right now so we'll be able to get an estimate on it. Well, getting back to the downtown program, I indicated this was the first phase, improving traffic flow. The second phase was to provide more parking, and this has been more or less completed now, too. The new parking lots are now open. There is more parking on some of the streets as well—River Avenue has parking on it, which it hasn't had for years—and we've added parking wherever we could. I think if one were to survey the parking lots now, you would find that they're better than fifty percent empty. With the establishment of the new rates, this has removed the merchants and the employees from the lots. And if I got one complaint that was unique, I got many of them that said, "Please put the charges back on the parking lots." This occurred when we were

redeveloping the lots and they were not ready for operation, but they were usable. We had free parking going in those lots, probably from November all the way through January at least. Many merchants called me and said, “I wish you’d get that parking there, I can’t get my employees to move out of those lots.” Well, a survey the day that we went in showed that most of the lots were vacant. So now, the employees have found places to store their cars out of the central business district, they’re walking a block or so, and this has greatly added to the availability of parking facilities for customers that are coming. So, that’s good.

While that completes the first phases of the city’s commitment downtown, with the exception of the new police building—that was another decision to put a \$750,000 building right downtown, the district court came along and put another quarter million dollars down there, so that’s over a million dollars in new facilities downtown. So, things are really popping downtown, and they can continue to grow, but we need this added emphasis now of the downtown beautification. We have an opportunity that wasn’t with us several years ago when we talked about the mall, and that is the concept of revenue sharing. We are proposing to develop this mall—parking area, I should say, and we’re calling it a plaza really—on the basis of using revenue sharing. There will not be any individual assessments against any of the property owners there; the benefit will be defrayed through revenue sharing. We are talking about angle parking in the block from River Avenue to Central, and from Central to College on 8th Street, and we would have restricted traffic movement in that area. We would have one way traffic east, and we would be able to narrow the throat slightly and put better protection for the pedestrians crossing at those crosswalks. In fact, we’re contemplating making a definite stop there

for people that are driving, so the pedestrians would have even better chance of using those crosswalks than they do right now. We think this is mandatory and would be great help if we could get it in.

In addition, we are going to consider the concept of putting street trees from Pine Avenue to Columbia, and we think this will greatly enhance the downtown business district. One of the things that amazes people when they come to town—I know it amazed me when I came here—is the beautiful commitment that the city has towards the wonderful tulips and its beautiful parks, but it has a rather ugly downtown district. It's almost devoid of any kind of landscaping at all. Well, the city is taking a lead in its new parking lots, they will be landscaped. In fact, the material is going in now. But the main business district doesn't have virtually any green shrubbery or any type of aesthetic balance at all. Fortunately, the merchants are very cooperative with their flush sign ordinance, and the new signs are going up in compliance with that, and one day we'll have all the signs down. This is good, and some of the store fronts are being remodeled. But really, if one were to take a view of any of the progressive towns—and there's over fifty towns in the country that have up-to-date beautification or malls—ours would look rather short and wanting from a standpoint of beautification. So this is why we're proposing this. We're talking, therefore, of a situation that will allow some traffic in the two blocks; we'll have almost double the parking that we have now; we'll have beautification down there, which will be a tremendous asset during Tulip Time, during the other times of the year. Really, I can't fathom too many reasons why anybody would be against it. We're going make a modest investment there, and people fail to realize that if you spend this money in the downtown district, you're going to upgrade and keep the

valuations down there. One only has to think of what a city is without a downtown.

There's some suburban communities in our neighborhood that do not have downtowns, and when you think of those towns, they lack identity, they lack cohesiveness, and they lack a reason to rally and move as a community. So, this is why we feel it's vital that we spend this money downtown. It will be a nominal amount compared to our total budget, and I think it's a very good investment.

Len: In other words, if this thing were to be functional, you'd have trees from Pine Avenue to Columbia Avenue. Then the beautification itself, or whatever you refer to there, would go from River Avenue to College Avenue, and you'd have one-way traffic going east. Two lanes of traffic?

BB: No, it'd probably be one large lane. We want to give adequate turning movements for people using the angle parking. So, in all probability, it'd be one lane. We'll have to lay that out, we're not sure, but in any event, it will be a large, generous lane, maybe two. But we don't expect a lot of traffic through there; this is going to be predominantly for people that want to park and shop. So, essentially, we'd be closing down a lot of movement through 8th Street there. This will answer the cry that we've gotten, too, to remove trucks off of 8th Street. I can't think of things that this proposal overlooks, really. It's answering almost all the questions that people have ever asked for.

Len: It will probably remove ambulances, because of the traffic will be going east and a lot of the ambulance traffic heads from east to west, sometimes, if it's going north of town.

BB: Well, they certainly have lots of avenues to use. We contemplated a full scale, closed mall at one time, and the ambulances would be able to go around; 7th Street and 9th

Street are available for them, either way. I don't think that the matter of two or three seconds going one more block is going to hurt them.

Len: I know this has been the human cry of some of the merchants because some of them feel that there's a creation of some danger by them using 8th Street at the present time. What are we talking in terms of cost, Bill, for the total project?

BB: Well, we haven't costed everything out, because a lot of this depended on how successfully this is received. But I would anticipate in the neighborhood of fifty to a hundred thousand dollars. And we can basically work with any budget that the council wants to set, because we can put in a few trees or more trees. One thing we have done, we're expanding, you know, much further than we ever did before. Some of our merchants on either end of this first two blocks feel like they've been stepchild and stepchildren, and I think this is only fair. We'll go into those other blocks and provide them some beautification and let them know that we are aware that they are in the city.

Len: What about the possibility of face-lifting some of these old buildings on 8th Street? You know, if you go down there and some of them look beautiful, and others look like they haven't been touched since the year they were built, you know, around the turn of the century.

BB: Well, Len, I think that's a very cogent point; I think that's the kind of thing that citizens like yourself and other people have to pass on to these owners. Several stores, I guess I won't name them, are doing a tremendous job downtown, and I think their profits in their cash registers show it, too. And I believe you have to put a little investment in in order to make it work. Some of those stores need a face-lifting, and I guess only time will tell. If we put enough effort all around those stores and make things look good, I think you're

going to see some growth. As a for instance, we're getting interest in the block of River that is vacant—I guess I can say very safely, the Tower Clock block. There's new interest in that block because of the parking that's available. And this moves to one other thing on tonight's agenda, or yesterday's agenda, was the parking lot that we made an offer on, the Reed Tire Shop is actually the Bolkema property, and we made an offer to the owner, as of Monday night's meeting, to purchase that. We'd like to develop that lot in conjunction with the lot that's the former City Sign building, and this will provide two new parking spots there, which will help to anchor those new buildings along River Avenue.

Len: Two parking lots rather than just spots, right?

BB: That would be two lots, yes. Did I say spots? Excuse me, two new parking lots.

Len: Okay. I was reading one day last week in the Detroit Free Press where the owners of the Northland Mall are talking about covering that giant complex of stores by 1975. If that can be done there, all of those stores, why couldn't something like that be done in a two-block area in downtown Holland? I think it would possibly attract people to stay here and shop rather than go to other areas where they have these enclosed malls.

BB: Well, I don't think that we have the kinds of shops in downtown Holland that would support that kind of expense. You need full-line department stores, and I don't think we quite have that yet. Although, you know, fine, if someone has that much imagination and wants to spur it on, more power to them. I have a hard time getting enough of a group together to even accept this plan that I'm proposing here. I think this is a starter. If we can go to that, why fine.

Len: Speaking of a starter, what's been the general acceptance or rejection so far of this plan?

BB: Well, everyone that I've talked to is basically in favor of it. We're testing people now, and when we have this other meeting next Monday, we'll get, I hope, a full scale reaction. As I say, to my way of thinking, unless someone just wants to do nothing downtown, I can't see why they'd be opposed to this, because it provides them more parking, it slows the traffic down, which was a problem, it will keep downtown a little quieter, it provides beautification, and heaven knows I don't know who's against that nowadays with the aesthetic concern. We ought to really have a ground swell spurring us on to do this; I hope that's the case.

Len: Let's hope that we hear more about that plan. What will be the next course of action should the meeting next week be in the affirmative? I mean, will the council be the ones that make the final decision?

BB: Yes, after we have these two meetings, and we will probably then get council to formally adopt the concept, and then we'll have to do our detailed design work. We'd like to have this ready for implementation sometime in June and be working on it all this summer, so it isn't the kind of thing that couldn't be, at least in large part, implemented by the summer.

Len: A couple of more brief items: number one, the swimming pool bids. Where do we stand on that, Bill?

BB: Well, we took bids yesterday afternoon, and we were happy to receive those bids. We're just in the process of tabulating them right now, so it's a little premature to tell, you know, where we sit. We had several alternates, so we have to evaluate those. But hopefully by the council meeting on the 21st, we'll be able to make a report and a recommendation.

Len: When do you hope to have construction underway?

BB: Well, shortly after the war of the bids. As soon as the weather, we'll get moving on it.

We're still shooting hopefully for an early summer opening, if we can.

Len: And one final item: where do we stand as far as our proposed park department warehouse?

BB: We had a meeting yesterday on that, and we'll be scheduling some additional meetings.

But yesterday's meeting was to start reviewing the detailed site plans and the acquisition of land where necessary, so we're starting right from the ground floor with our architect so that we buy just the right land that we want and reduce any superfluous costs. So, we're moving right along. That first meeting got us on the way towards actual implementation.

Len: Okay, that's our City Manager's report for this Tuesday afternoon, the 6th of February.

We want to thank Holland City Manager Bill Bopf for being with us...

[End of recording]