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Argus-Courier Editorial

Will Lowe's exit delay project?

Published: Wednesday, October 26, 2011 at 3:00 a.m.

When the developer of a proposed eastside shopping center to be anchored by Lowe's announced last week that the national home-improvement store was withdrawing from the project, it left many local residents wondering if Petaluma will ever get a full-sized home-improvement store.

Merlone Geier Partners, the developers of Deer Creek Village, vow that they'll find a replacement home-improvement store tenant and will move forward with the project, which is expected to go to the Planning Commission next month and the City Council after that for final approval.

The loss of Lowe's is a setback, to be sure; the question is, will it further delay the project? Lowe's said it had decided to stop plans for the store because all of the approvals needed for the project were not obtained by a deadline that Lowe's had agreed upon with the developers.

The approval process for the project has been a long and tortuous one. The center, to be located on North McDowell Boulevard between Rainier Avenue and Lynch Creek Way, has suffered from an arduous public approval process in which the city required a fiscal and economic impact report, a special air quality study, a traffic study and an additional report to document the center's economic impact on competing businesses.

These reports were expected to help the city defend itself against what many believe will be an inevitable lawsuit filed by the same people who worked so feverishly to stop the Target shopping center over a period of seven years. The additional studies were required in spite of the fact that the city's General Plan includes an economic goal of expanding and diversifying Petaluma's weak retail sector by attracting new stores, including a "large-format house and home retailer" like Lowe's, at specifically designated sites long planned and zoned for shopping centers.

A home-improvement center would certainly fill a huge void in Petaluma's limited retail offerings, especially home and building supplies which are nearly non-existent here. With Lowe's out of the picture, the center's developers have a very short list of prospective home improvement store tenants with which to negotiate a long term lease. The nation's No. 1 home center chain, Home Depot, has outlets in most California cities of Petaluma's size or larger, so they are a likely candidate. And given the popularity of Sonoma County-based Friedman's Home Improvement, which has expressed interest in returning to Petaluma after 35 years, they too are a



logical prospect. Either store would be a welcome addition for Petalumans who continue to drive out of town in droves every weekend to buy home-improvement items elsewhere.

The 36-acre site is appropriately zoned and, given its proximity near the center of the city's population base, appears to be particularly well suited for the new center, which could also include a home electronics store. The developers have made a number of changes to their plans to improve the project, many of them in direct response to residents' suggestions at numerous meetings with neighborhood groups and city representatives.

Despite the fact that the project's developers have complied with everything required of them by the city, it's unclear whether the Planning Commission and the City Council will approve the project without knowing the specific name of the anchor tenant. Never mind that the project's approval would go a long way to assuring a prospective tenant that they were actually welcome in Petaluma, and thereby hasten the signing of a lease.

Especially since the city approval would mandate that only a home-improvement store could occupy the anchor space, should the city decide to withhold entitlements for the project until the developer has signed a lease with a specific tenant, it would needlessly delay the project's eventual construction.

While the development's environmental impact report concludes that there are some unavoidable impacts of the project — mostly localized traffic congestion — it appears that the many economic and fiscal benefits of Deer Creek Village far outweigh the negatives.

In addition to creating 510 full-time jobs and 300 temporary construction jobs, the project promises \$1 million annually in sales- and property-tax revenue, which would help fund local road repairs, park maintenance, transportation improvements, public safety services and nonprofit organizations.

It is our sincere hope that city officials will do whatever possible to expedite this long-delayed project's final approval and thereby demonstrate to their constituents that they are sincere about creating a stronger, more sustainable local economy and improving Petaluma's fiscal health.

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