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## Review of Lowe's center kicks off

**Documents released; project to be reviewed by city Planning Commission this month**

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The public process for the Lowe's shopping center kicked off last week with the release of environmental documents, and familiar lines have been drawn in the discussion that could bring another large-scale shopping center to town.

The environmental impact report was released March 3 for the 364,000-square-foot shopping center that sits on the southwest edge of Rainier Avenue and North McDowell Boulevard and includes a proposed Lowe's home improvement store as an anchor tenant. The document is now available for public review and is awaiting a March 22 preliminary hearing by the Planning Commission. The final EIR is due in May with a vote by the City Council possible in July.

Concerns over traffic, pollution and impacts on local businesses have been expressed as the project begins to make its way through the review process. But others have praised the economic benefits of the center to the city and job-seekers.

"Any time there is a big-box store, that's something that we would question the wisdom of for a bunch of reasons," said Greg Reisinger, co-chair of Petaluma Tomorrow, a local organization aimed at ensuring "responsible development."

Reisinger said that Petaluma Tomorrow is worried about the long-term benefits and staying-power of the center and the impacts that it would have on other businesses in town.

"You could make an argument that we could have a home improvement store, but Cotati ain't that far," said Reisinger, who also said that a mixed-use design is a priority.

Reisinger also said that Merlone Geier, the developers of the land, must prove their investment in the community.

"Merlone Geier appears to be more involved in the community, which is a good sign," he said.

Marko Mlikotin, president of River City Communications, a contracted spokesperson for Merlone Geier, said that the center will be an economic boost to the city and "poses no threat to existing businesses."

"We have found the draft EIR to be thorough and conservative in its conclusions," said Mlikotin. "It underscores the fact that the project will generate a considerable amount of tax revenue.

The report outlines the project's impacts in a number of areas. Impacts on air quality, traffic, and noise levels were found "significant but unavoidable," while impacts in

other areas, such as fire routes and public facilities, were found “less than significant.” City planner Heather Hines said that these impacts are to be expected for a large-scale project. A large shopping center at the site was included in the city’s General Plan approved in 2025.

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While a number of impacts were outlined in the General Plan, city planners have been working for more than two years to provide more detail in the project-specific EIR. The release date of the EIR has been set back three times as planners determined the need for more in-depth studies on air quality and “blight” impacts.

In September, the developers hinted at legal action over the delays, saying that the city had missed a one-year deadline to certify the EIR. The city contended that the deadline is “not hard and fast.”

An economic analysis by the city in 2009 found that the shopping center would create 510 permanent jobs and about \$1 million per year in sales tax, in addition to development fees.

Onita Pellegrini, CEO of the Petaluma Area Chamber of Commerce, emphasized the importance of the economic boost to the city and job-seekers.

“I’m happy to see the project move forward,” she said. “I’m looking forward to having a lumber store back in town.”

Pellegrini said that the project would not take away from other stores’ sales because “we do not have any businesses in town that would do what a Lowe’s would do.”

She also said that she hopes the process goes smoothly and is not as heated as the debate over the Target shopping center.

“I guess we’re all nervous it will take on that life,” she said. “I’m hopeful we can work together and not fall into the same mistakes. The way the discourse (over the Target center) was handled was a mistake.”

Public comments on the EIR will be accepted at City Hall or by e-mail until April 18. The comments will be included in packets for the City Council and Planning Commission when they review the project.

“Whatever comments we have when we head to either board will be included in their review,” said Hines.

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