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Lowe's center gets mixed reviews

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At the first public review of the already-controversial Lowe's shopping center on Tuesday, members of the Planning Commission gave the project a lukewarm reception and outlined a number of concerns raised in the draft environmental impact report.

Commissioners passed on their recommendations to the City Council, who plan to discuss the environmental findings on April 18.

The 344,000-square-foot shopping center is set to include a Lowe's home improvement store and various other retailers as well as a possible fitness center, grocery store, pharmacy and office space.

Environmental consultants hired to analyze the site, in the vacant lot just west of Petaluma Valley Hospital, said that it would generate a number of "significant and unavoidable" impacts, most notably in the areas of greenhouse gases and traffic. The project would generate 10,155 daily vehicle trips and may have a "significant" impact on existing retail businesses near the center, possibly contributing to "urban decay" before the economy recovers fully, according to the EIR.

But the project would also have economic benefits, pointed out its supporters. The center is estimated to generate \$407,000 per year in sales tax revenue and 510 permanent jobs in addition to development impact fees, according to the report.

Darryl Paris, a Petaluma-based general contractor, said that he routinely drives to Lowe's in Rohnert Park to get supplies and lumber for his work.

"We're losing money," he said. "We need it here."

Others were more concerned about the impacts of the project on the surrounding area. Mary Glardon, who lives next to the project site, said that Merlone Geier, the developers of the project, have "not worked with the neighborhood" and residents have not had enough time to read over the lengthy draft EIR, which was released March 3.

Planning Commissioners discussed many design aspects and concerns with the project, some weighing in against the proposal outright.

"Let's look to put this somewhere else," said commissioner Alicia Kae Herries.

"The greenhouse gas emissions are staggering," she said. "It's unfathomable that we could even begin to consider this (with the greenhouse gas levels proposed)."

Commissioner Marianne Hurley questioned the need for a Lowe's in Petaluma when there is a store nearby in Cotati.

"I'm personally always taken aback by the comment that 'I can't drive six miles to Cotati,'" she said. "Where do we stop building sometimes?" she questioned. "We live in a region."

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Others admitted the need for a lumber supplier in town but raised serious concerns over the traffic impacts and whether some stores and offices should be built given the 40 percent vacancy rate in town.

"Traffic for me is a concern," said Councilmember and Planning Commission liaison Chris Albertson, who supported the project but said that the Rainier crosstown connector "has to happen" at some point to relieve traffic.

Other concerns included potential flooding, the placement of PG&E lines on the property and LEED environmental certification. Some commissioners went over designs they would like to see in the project that were not in preliminary drawings, including a "living roof" garden, a multi-story parking garage, parking covered with solar panels and additional "mixed-use" components.

"Energy efficiency is a great incentive for tenants. It reduces their own costs," said Commissioner Melissa Abercrombie, who previously recused herself from votes on the Target shopping center because of her involvement in the Petaluma Neighborhood Association, an anti-big-box group. Commissioner Herries also signed a Petaluma Neighborhood Association petition in 2007 opposing big-box development. It is unclear whether their vote would open the city to potential liability or whether they plan to recuse themselves from future votes.

While no formal vote was taken Tuesday, the commissioners' concerns and recommendations will be considered by the City Council at its April 18 hearing of the draft EIR. The final EIR is scheduled come to the Planning Commission in June and reach the council for a final vote in July.

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