

EIR for Petaluma Lowe's center sent to council

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The much-anticipated draft environmental impact report for a Lowe's-anchored shopping center in east Petaluma along Highway 101 received its first public airing Tuesday night at the Planning Commission, with no shortage of questions surrounding the controversial proposal.

The seven-member commission decided to defer making recommendations to the City Council until the final version of the report is ready.

The draft EIR on Deer Creek Village next heads to the City Council on April 18. The final report with responses to concerns raised is scheduled for completion in May, with review by the Planning Commission in June and the council in July.

Nine members of the public weighed in on Tuesday, seven of whom spoke in support of the project and the jobs and sales-tax revenue it promises. Two people questioned the accuracy and completeness of the document.

Planning commissioners asked pointed questions about traffic impacts, wetlands mitigation, flooding potential, whether there are large underground PG&E gas lines below the proposed center and whether there truly is a need for some of the commercial and office uses in the project.

Commissioners Jennifer Pierre and Marianne Hurley raised concerns that a need for office space — at a time when the city has an office vacancy rate near 40 percent — wasn't justified by the documentation. Hurley also questioned the true need for a Lowe's when one exists in Cotati.

"I can understand the need for a home improvement store in our own backyard, but this is a huge impact," Hurley said, calling the effects "huge, to have something 6 miles closer."

Commissioner Alicia Kae Herries called much of the data used in the EIR outdated and suggested a return to the drawing board.

"Let's look to put this somewhere else," she said. "This project is just asphalt to me. I think we need to do better."

Speakers in support of the project included representatives of the construction industry, the Chamber of Commerce and downtown Petaluma businesses.

"We need to weigh the benefits of the project versus the impacts," said Ray Johnson, a former candidate for the City Council who ran on a pro-business platform.

"No project is perfect. We need revenue from a reliable vendor that gives us a service we don't have."

The draft EIR concluded there were several unavoidable impacts of the 344,000-square-foot project. Those include impacts to air quality, traffic noise and traffic

congestion near the 36.5-acre North McDowell Boulevard-Rainier Avenue site.

San Francisco-based Merlone Geier Partners has said a Lowe's home improvement warehouse will be the anchor tenant, along with three smaller anchors including a gym and possibly an electronics store. A 1,267-space parking lot is planned.

Deer Creek is estimated to generate \$407,000 a year for the city's general fund in new sales-tax revenue, equating to 42 percent of sales tax revenues generated by new retail growth, according to the report.

The developer also would pay several million dollars in impact fees.

As proposed, the project would generate about 10,155 daily vehicle trips, including 371 in the peak morning hour, 985 in the evening and 1,244 weekend midday peak, according to the EIR.

Another area of concern noted in the EIR was cumulative effects on other businesses in Petaluma and the potential for "urban decay" if Deer Creek caused other businesses to close.

The report concluded that Deer Creek, coupled with the effects of the already approved Target-anchored East Washington Place project, is likely to have a significant impact on existing retail businesses and "temporarily could be conducive to urban decay." But, the report said, that effect is lessened by flexible zoning, high real estate values and proactive economic development in Petaluma.

The potential retail sales shifts as a result of the project and East Washington Place are "not likely to impact the retail market in downtown Petaluma," the report said.

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