

PD Editorial: Petaluma project worthy of approval

Published: Sunday, April 24, 2011 at 3:00 a.m.

This newspaper has not shied from opposing a development project that we believed was out of scale, out of compliance with planning documents or just out of touch with a community's overall desires.

But we don't see those concerns at play regarding the proposed Deer Creek Village project targeted for vacant land at the southwest corner of Rainier Avenue and North McDowell Boulevard in Petaluma.

On the contrary, despite legitimate traffic impacts — which won't be fully addressed until Petaluma finally has a Highway 101 interchange at Rainer Avenue — we believe this project is in the right place at the right time.

Deer Creek Village calls for 344,000 square feet of retail and office space including a health club, restaurants and shops. The biggest component is a Lowe's home improvement center that would be built in the heart of the 36.5-acre site.

Many objections have been raised about this development, ranging from its potential to cause flooding to its potential to create blight. Most of these objections, in our view, are more alarmist than enlightening and should not be used as an excuse for holding up this project when its environmental impact report comes before the City Council for review on Monday.

First, Deer Creek does not require a change to the general plan or zoning. In short, it fits the blueprint for what the city has laid out for that property. In fact, the general plan anticipated a project more than 15 percent larger than what is being proposed here.

Second, despite concerns about flooding, this site is not designated in a 100-year or 500-year flood plain, and there's scant evidence to suggest the risk of flooding will be significant. On the contrary, this project has the potential to contribute more to the quality of life in the area than detract from it. The developers, Merlone Geier Partners of San Francisco, have set aside six acres for a pedestrian-bicycle bike path along a restored creek area and a fenced dog park. In response to neighborhood input, it also has included a "Main Street" area that can be closed off for farmers markets and other community events.

Not to be lost in this discussion are the significant economic benefits. The project is expected to bring in more than \$400,000 in additional sales tax revenue each year and hundreds of thousands of dollars in one-time development fees to a city that, like many, is struggling to balance its books. Due to declining tax revenue, the City Council is already looking at cutting \$4 million, or 12 percent of its budget.

The project would also provide some 800 jobs to a county that's struggling to keep its jobless rate below 10 percent.

Finally, it would bring a much-needed hardware store to Petaluma, a community that, studies shows, loses millions in sales tax revenue to other communities because it lacks sufficient retail offerings of its own to meet residents' needs.

The one area where opponents' criticism has validity concerns the traffic counts. For example, it's not clear by the limited traffic analysis provided what traffic conditions would look like if Rainer Avenue includes a crosstown connector but not an interchange. This is something that should be included in the City Council review. But we don't see this concern alone as reason to hold up this project any longer than it has been.

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The project, years in the making, is still not perfect. But Merlone Geier has created something that fits with the needs of the neighborhood and the community — and deserves to move forward.