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Argus-Courier Editorial

Opportunity comes knocking

But will the City Council answer?

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It is ironic that on the same night the City Council agreed to cut a whopping \$4 million, or 12 percent of its budget in the new fiscal year due to declining tax revenues, they also voted to delay discussion of a proposed eastside shopping center that would generate an estimated \$407,000 annually in new sales tax revenue for the city.

After years of internal review, multiple studies and numerous delays, the council will finally hold a hearing on April 25 to review the draft environmental impact report for a proposed 344,000-square-foot Lowe's-anchored shopping center.

While the EIR concludes that there are some unavoidable impacts of the project — including traffic congestion, traffic noise and air quality — it appears that the many economic and fiscal benefits of Deer Creek Village far outweigh the negatives.

The center, to be located on North McDowell Boulevard between Rainier Avenue and Lynch Creek Way, has gone through a lengthy 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 are expected to help the city defend itself against what many believe will be an inevitable lawsuit filed by the same people who worked diligently to stop the Target shopping center over a period of eight years. The documents 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 such as Lowe's would certainly fill a huge void in Petaluma's limited retail offerings, especially home and building supplies, which are nearly non-existent here. The developers, Merlone Geier Partners, have said they also intend to bring in a home electronics store — representing another big gap in the city's porous retail fabric that forces Petalumans to drive out of town to purchase goods not generally available here.

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 stores. The developers have made a number of changes to their plans to improve the project, most of them after numerous meetings with neighborhood groups and city representatives.

While the General Plan EIR assumed the construction of a 400,000-square-foot

shopping center at the site, Merlone Geier has scaled back the size to 315,000 square feet (plus a 25,000-square foot outdoor garden center at Lowe's) and left six acres open at the north end of the property for walking and jogging trails, a dog park and restored creek area.

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The enhanced design of the project, which contrasts markedly with the poorly designed Kohl's shopping center on the north end of town, includes a "Main Street" that can be closed off for farmers' markets and other community events and gatherings for eastside residents.

While anti-big-box opponents as well as some planning commissioners have expressed concerns about perceived impacts on other businesses as well as greenhouse gas emissions, the new center would benefit local business by encouraging residents to stay in Petaluma to do their shopping. It is also likely that total emissions will be significantly lessened since Petalumans won't have to drive six to 20 miles north or south for their home improvement needs.

The project is located outside the 100-year floodplain, drainage issues have been properly addressed and many "green building" elements are incorporated in the overall design.

Both Lowe's and Merlone Geier have a track record of working with the communities where they have stores. Lowe's has contributed generously to Rebuilding Together Petaluma and is a national sponsor of the Boys & Girls Clubs.

After the City Council discusses the EIR on April 25, the final report is expected to be completed in May. The developers say that if the project wins city approval this summer, the center could be open for business by next summer.

With 510 full time jobs and 300 temporary construction jobs hanging in the balance, the council has an opportunity to finally implement one of the primary economic goals of the General Plan, ensuring that increased tax revenues will eventually close the city's gaping budget deficit, helping fund road repairs, park maintenance, transportation improvements, law enforcement and non-profit organizations.

Approval of Deer Creek Village in a timely manner will be an important step toward providing residents with more local and badly needed retail shopping opportunities, saving them time and gasoline, and ensuring a more sustainable local economy.

If you agree, we encourage you to attend the City Council hearing on April 25 and make your voice heard.