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Deer Creek design approved

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ARGUS-COURIER STAFF

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Tuesday's Planning Commission meeting became a forum for supporters and opponents of Friedman's Home Improvement-based Deer Creek Village shopping center and ended with commissioners voting to approve the project's site plans and design.

The lone dissenting vote belonged to Commissioner Alicia Kae Herries, who called the project "a violation of the city council's general plan" that did not adhere to mixed-use development standards and hinged on a Highway 101 interchange at Rainer that may never materialize.

The meeting featured a presentation from developer Merlone Geier showcasing some of the artistic features of the proposed 36.5 acre site, including a Main Street that would run parallel to North McDowell Boulevard in the center of the plaza that would be available for farmer's markets and community gatherings and a 30 percent land allocation to open spaces and pedestrian walkways.

Proposed flagship store owner Bill Friedman said he plans to make this Friedman's the "highlight of all our stores."

Despite excitement of bringing a homegrown business back to Petaluma and the chance for retail revenue for the city, opponents to the project worried about the impact to the surrounding community. Former City Councilmember Janice Cader-Thompson said that while she supports Friedmans' return to the city, she is against the project because of potential traffic impacts and the effects of signs to the neighborhood.

"This is going to be a traffic nightmare," Cader-Thompson said.

While traffic concerns were acknowledged by commissioners, signage came to the forefront of the discussion, including color, brightness and height. Lead architect Kevin James said that signage lighting would be backlit and time-sensored. Commissioners Melissa Abercrombie, Jennifer Pierre, Ray Johnson and council liaison Gabe Kearny voted to approve the design with some added conditions regarding large delivery truck flow and safety concerns, while Commissioner Bill Wolpert recused himself due to a letter of opposition he wrote to the city council about the project. Commissioner Dennis Elias was not present.

Merlone Geier spokesman Marko Mlikotin said that unless the Planning Commission's decision is overturned in an appeal, Friedman's hopes to open in the fall of 2013.

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