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Petaluma City Council OKs final Deer Creek Village environmental report

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Despite vocal opposition and calls for additional studies, a split Petaluma City Council early Tuesday approved the final environmental analysis of the Deer Creek Village shopping center.

The certification of the report is essentially the approval for the 36½-acre, 344,000-square-foot project, which is to be anchored by a Friedman's Home Improvement store. The project must still go through the design review for approval of architectural details.

Mike Healy, Mike Harris, Chris Albertson and Gabe Kearney voted to certify the final environmental impact report, while Tiffany Renee, Teresa Barrett and Mayor David Glass voted to reject it.

The decision didn't come easily: about 200 people packed City Hall for the hearing, which lasted six hours. Forty-seven residents spoke, 32 in favor of the project and of welcoming Friedman's back to its hometown after a four-decade absence.

Two opponents have retained lawyers to spearhead their resistance, although they didn't overtly threaten legal action Monday night.

Small business owner Bryce Pattison supported the project. He said he bought a fixer-upper when he moved to Petaluma and has spent more than \$50,000 - "every penny of it in Santa Rosa" because Petaluma has no home improvement warehouse.

Developer Merlone Geier Partners of San Francisco has been working with the city since 2008 to develop the vacant property, at Rainier Avenue and North McDowell Boulevard along Highway 101, a site that was envisioned in the 2008 general plan for an even larger shopping center than Deer Creek.

Glass wanted a site with most of the retail space replaced a residential care facility for the elderly, although that option failed to gain any other council support.

"Was it what I wanted? No. But it did get improved," he said of the final Deer Creek proposal.

Merlone Geier spokesman Marko Mlikotin said the center will bring hundreds of jobs to Petaluma and about \$1 million annually in sales and property tax revenue. The city will also receive about \$9.2 million in development impact fees.

"Clearly this was the most significant hurdle, so we're pleased," Mlikotin said after the 1 a.m. vote. "The response from the community was great. They're very excited about Friedmans' return.

Friedman Brothers began in Petaluma in 1946 but left in 1970 after a fire. Today there are three Friedman's Home Improvement stores, in Santa Rosa, Sonoma and Ukiah.

Owner Bill Friedman said Monday night that "always, the family's dream was to

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come back.” His company signed a long-term lease this year after Lowe's home improvement backed out in October.

Friedman's is expected to bring more than 100 new jobs, Vice President Barry Friedman said.

He called the vote an “important step toward economic sustainability for the community.”

City staff recommended approval, while noting that the analysis found significant and unavoidable impacts from traffic and greenhouse gas emissions. But state environmental laws say if the benefits of the project outweigh unavoidable adverse effects, they can be considered acceptable.

Several speakers said the benefits of the center, and Friedman's in particular, outweigh the costs.

Critics, including former council member Janice Cader-Thompson, raised concerns about a lack of certain funding for the planned Rainier Avenue cross-town connector and freeway interchange, envisioned as a way to ease traffic congestion.

Cader-Thompson's lawyers - who also represent Syers Properties, the owners of the nearby Plaza North Kmart shopping center - asked the council to reject the EIR, redo the traffic study or approve an alternative that would significantly reduce the retail component.

“You can't have a project this size because our city streets can't handle it,” she said.

Eighty-three-year-old Louise Vicino urged the council to hurry up and approve Deer Creek.

“I'd like to be able to shop here in Petaluma,” she said, instead of in Novato or Santa Rosa. “I'd like to see it come in before I kick the bucket.”

Friedman's expects to open in the summer of 2013, pending design approvals at the planning commission.

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