

# Shopping center advances despite a heavy protest

By KEN McLAUGHLIN

In effect disagreeing with downtown revitalization proponents, the city Planning Commission Monday night voted to accept the findings of an environmental impact report on a proposed shopping center at Green Valley Road and Main Street.

To the dismay of redevelopment devotees, the EIR had concluded that the effect of the center on the downtown would be "moderate."

Advocates of revitalization feel the shopping center will severely hurt the chances for a born-again central business district.

The revitalization proponents turned out in force at Monday night's public hearing on the proposed center, with commissioners taking two hours of often emotional testimony from citizens, public officials and citizens.

Pajaro Valley Supervisor Chris Matthews told the commission that the shopping center proposal "frightened" him.

"If your downtown dies, your town dies," warned Matthews, saying he'd seen evidence of this in his native New Jersey.

The supervisor asked commissioners to make any proposed development on the site "compatible," not "competitive" with downtown businesses.

The developer of the proposed project and his attorney, however, cautioned against "economic protectionism."

"The whole idea of insulating the central business district from competition should be put to rest once and for all," asserted Watsonville attorney Tom Skillicorn.

The economic development of the city, he said, "should not be stifled by artificial barriers that don't make economic sense."

Skillicorn rattled off a list of projects in the downtown that he said proved that the downtown is not dying, as many redevelopment proponents lament. And the attorney denied that the city was "doing nothing" about the downtown, saying that it has spent a lot of money on studies and keeping the central business spruced up. The city's actions, he maintained, indicate that city fathers "are supporting the downtown business area."

"The city has made steady progress toward the goal of downtown revitalization," Skillicorn said.

He noted that he had been one of the founding members of the Watsonville Area Development Corporation, adding that he was "dismayed to see the group become politicized."

The WADC recently called for a moratorium on new shopping centers outside the downtown, saying that "now is the time to draw the line and begin a concentrated effort in the downtown."

WADC president Monte Lewis Monday night repeated the request for a moratorium and asked city officials to appoint a "select committee" to confront the shopping center issue. He suggested

that the committee consist of project developer Bill Burgstrom and other developers such as Chuck Allen and Jim Arnerich, downtown businessmen such as George Menasco, as well as city officials.

"This issue in our opinion is top priority and we are looking to you for leadership," Lewis said. "Let's create something positive out of this mess."

But Skillicorn grimaced at the idea for a committee, saying that committees create "two-humped camels." As for the moratorium, "that's another word for stall," the attorney said.

Only one person not associated with the developer spoke in favor of the proposed center. Gary Plomp, of 105 Progress Drive, said that Watsonville "doesn't have a first-rate movie house" and needs one desperately.

As proposed now, the center would contain either a 12,000 movie theater or corporate offices of similar size, 26,413 square foot supermarket, a 42,300 square foot drug store, 30,200 square feet of retail space and a 5,225 square foot bank.

The Planning Commission agreed with an economic consultant that the proposed drug store was too big. So in accepting the EIR findings, the commission asked the developer to reduce the size of the store. How much the store should be reduced, however, was not specified.

All told, the center would — as planned now — consist of 116,138 square feet of commercial development, which downtown redevelopment proponents and businessmen feel is outrageous.

Mark Frederickson, owner of the Monterey Bay Co. clothing store, pointed out Monday night that the Deer Park Center in Rio del Mar is only 71,000 square feet — and many planners now agree that the center is more than a "neighborhood shopping center" as originally planned.

The proposed center, he said, would be more in line with Rancho Del Mar shopping center in Aptos.

"It's hard to believe," Frederickson said of the proposed center.

Commissioner Steve DuFour, the owner of a downtown business himself, expressed concern that the center was not a "neighborhood shopping center." And Planning Director Bob Ellenwood agreed with him that the label "convenience center" (used in the EIR) was not correct.

"It's either a very large neighborhood shopping center or a very small community shopping center (the latter being planners' jargon for a center that serves a population of 100,000 people).

It's not yet a "regional center," he said, adding that "even the downtown" is not considered a regional attraction.

The commission, however, made no attempt to reduce the overall square footage of the center. It voted 5-0 to accept the EIR findings, with Commissioners Alan Delfino and Gene Friend abstaining because of conflicts of

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interest. (Both have business ties with the developers.)

Other people to speak at Monday night's hearing included:

—Burgstrom, the developer, who maintained that many of the city's economic reports — which downtown revitalization advocates used to make their case against the center — were "irrelevant." He said everyone at the meeting was essentially "working for the same thing" (the economic health of the city), contending that the center would improve the overall economic health of the city. He decried the lament of revitalization proponents who say "that the downtown is dying."

—Roger Hoffman, developer of the Mansion House historical rehabilitation project. In response to Skillicorn's argument that the city had taken a lot of action on downtown redevelopment, he said he "applauded the results . . . but that doesn't mean there isn't room for improvement." He denied that revitalization advocates were "attempting to restrain competition," saying that promoting a strong downtown would represent "sound planning."

—Ken Miller, chairman of the Central Business Improvement District and the owner of Johnson Drug. He contended that the city HAS "done a lot" for the downtown, "but there's kind of a Mason-Dixon line" at Maple Avenue. He cited the condition of other cities that have let their downtown die, saying the result is "sad and pathetic."

—Bill Shelton, a community activist who's been involved with El Pajaro Community Development Corporation. He called the downtown the "spiritual center of the Pajaro Valley," saying that downtown revitalization would address the "hunger of people for a sense of community." Shopping centers, he argued, do little to "enhance human interaction." Commented Shelton: "All (the people) are stuck in houses watching TV. Then they go to K-Mart to shop — and return to watch TV."

—Bob Wacker, operator of the soon-to-be-opened Mansion House restaurant, who maintained that 12,000 square feet of theater space would preclude development of a theater in the downtown, which he said is "vital" to promote night-time pedestrian traffic.

—Chuck Rowe, Santa Cruz County planning commissioner and the former senior planner of the city of Watsonville. "To hear Mr. Skillicorn describe it, we have a success story on our hands," Rowe remarked. The city, he said, has done something for the downtown, "but I don't feel the city is doing enough to be constructive." Said Rowe: "If you (planning commissioners) approve this project, (as proposed) then you're making a mistake."

—Mario Carabarin of the newly formed Latin American Chamber of Commerce. The organization, he said, is "deeply concerned" about the "adverse effect" of the center on the downtown and joins the WADC in calling for a moratorium on new centers. Downtown redevelopment, he said, would be difficult, "but we're willing to take on the challenge to make Watsonville a place we can all be proud of."

—Neil Beeman, the architect of the proposed center. He argued that the center would mean Watsonville people would be staying in Watsonville to shop, "rather than jumping on the freeway." Said Beeman: "They'll get in the habit of staying here,—thus, he maintained, it would tend to help downtown businesses."

Because the city staff didn't have all the necessary documents ready for Monday night's meeting, the Planning Commission was unable to take action on the use permit requested by the center's developer. That action is expected to come June 16, when the public hearing on the center will continue.

Perhaps the most emotional part of the hearing Monday night came when Commissioner Dufour said he was "proud to live in Watsonville."

"It's a super place to live — and a fine place to raise your kids," he said. "I get frustrated when people knock Watsonville — I want that attitude charged. It makes me mad."

Replied Roger Hoffman from the audience: "Why do you think we're all here if we don't like it?"