

City approves shopping center

By KEN McLAUGHLIN

Suddenly it was over.

After months of debate over a proposed shopping center at Green Valley Road and Main Street, the City Council Tuesday night approved the project on a 4-3 vote.

An attempt by Councilman Charles Palmtag to trim the size of the center by at least 16,000 square feet failed on an identical vote. Siding with Palmtag, as they have in the past, were councilwomen Ann Soldo and Betty Murphy. Those three council members also voted to deny the project.

Voting to approve the 116,000 square-foot center — which has been fought vigorously by downtown merchants and redevelopment advocates — were Mayor Bill Johnston, Frank Osmer, Jean McNeil and Vido Deretich.

The vote came as no surprise, considering that the latter four had voted to clear the way for the center in July by making changes in the city's General Plan. Most of the 11-acre shopping center site had been designated residential in the General Plan, but the majority of the council voted to change it all to commercial.

Councilwoman Betty Murphy also tried Tuesday to get left-hand turns banned on North Main Street near the proposed center, but the council

majority decided not to go along.

Councilman Vido Deretich noted that left turns are permitted into the East Lake Village Shopping Center, adding that East Lake Avenue is one of the busiest streets in the city. "People (i.e., drivers) are careful," he remarked.

Deretich added that some accidents are bound to happen, but "so what?"

Before the council considered the shopping center use permit, downtown devotee Ken Miller handed City Clerk Dorothy Bennett a petition against the center. He said it contained the names of 329 people. Thirty-four of the petitioners, he said, live in the mobile home park adjacent to the shopping center site.

Miller asked that people in the audience be allowed to speak on the issue, but Mayor Bill Johnston pointed out that the public hearing had been closed in November. And City Attorney Don Haile noted that the hearing could not be reopened without advertising it in the newspaper.

Nonetheless, Russ Walker, manager of the J.C. Penney department store, spoke indirectly about the issue during the "oral communications" segment of the council meeting.

He said his concern was the lack of retail growth in the downtown, and he pointed to a dozen businesses that he

said had closed in the downtown within the past year. (Councilman Frank Osmer noted afterward that one of the businesses mentioned by Walker, the original Wooden Nickel restaurant on West Fifth Street, had simply been sold, not gone out of business.)

Walker remarked that the city had an "environmental problem" in the downtown that city fathers needed to contend with.

The council minority did win some concessions from the majority on some issues. For instance, it agreed with Councilman Palmtag that a noise buffer — either foliage or a wall — should be put between the shopping center and the mobile home park.

Also, the entire council eventually agreed with Palmtag that "it's ridiculous to approve a use permit without any uses."

The final map presented by the developers did not specify what kinds of stores were going into the center. So the council specified that the large stores must be the same as those mentioned in the environmental impact report (EIR) on the project. The report had indicated that a large drug store, supermarket, bank, restaurant and movie theater (or offices) would be built. If any major

WATSONVILLE
REGISTER-PAJARONIAN
January 28, 1981

changes are made, the developers will have to return to the council for permission to change the types of businesses.

Councilwoman Soldo noted that the EIR had concluded that the size of the drug store (now planned to be 40,000 square feet) should be reduced. But a motion by Palmtag to reduce the size to 30,000 square feet failed on a 4-3 vote.

"Why pick out one business (and discriminate)?" asked Councilman Osmer.

On the issue of what to do with 3½ acres adjacent to the shopping center, the council decided that the Planning Commission should study the "best use of the land."

The 3½ acres had been listed on the developer's map as "Phase Two" of the center, but no uses had been specified.

About 35 people turned out to listen to the council's deliberations on the shopping center use permit.

By the time the council made its decision, the news was almost anticlimatic (because it was obvious how the vote would go). As a result, the decision was taken quietly.

"We're disappointed in the outcome, of course," said a resigned Ken Miller, who added that the new center was in reality a "community center," not a "neighborhood center."

He said the council's decision may have the effect of "interfering with the commitment to revitalization of the downtown."

The developer of the center, Bill Burgstrom, plans on selling the shopping center site to Dillingham Investments, a large development firm with offices in Walnut Creek. The firm has developed large shopping centers in Hawaii.

Action on the center's use permit may be complete, but the issue of peripheral shopping centers is not expected to die.

Chuck Rowe, a former Watsonville senior planner, said this morning that some redevelopment advocates are mulling over two options aimed at attacking the problems resulting from economic decentralization and a stagnant central business district.

One way, he said, is through "legal action" to stop the center. "Procedurally, the city is quite vulnerable," he remarked.

Another option, he said, is to "appeal to the community" with a ballot measure aimed at preventing future shopping center development.

"The people should be given a chance to be heard in a more open manner than has occurred to date," he said.