

Home Depot drafts Soquel store proposal

Officials wary of traffic, effect on local business

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SOQUEL — Home Depot, the nation's largest home improvement store, hopes to raze 16 homes and several businesses to erect a 107,148-square-foot store at the north end of 41st Avenue in Soquel.

Though stopping short of saying it absolutely wants to build in Soquel, the company has filed a "statement of proposed operations" and a development permit application with the county planning department.

County officials have yet to review the application, which was accompanied by a \$1,842 filing fee.

"At this point, Home Depot has still not made a final decision about this location," said Amy Friend, a corporate spokeswoman.

"We are seeing enough of our customers at other stores who have Santa Cruz addresses that we know there is a customer base in Santa Cruz county and we want to be able to serve those customers," Friend said.

Owners of 13 parcels on the potential store site along Soquel Drive say they have been wooed by the retail giant for up to five years.

The area includes 13.5 acres from Carriker Lane

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'How is it going to respect the surrounding neighbors?'

— Supervisor Jan Beautz

Home Depot

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to Greenbrae Lane.

Some owners are more eager to sell than others. While they have not all promised to sell, Home Depot paperwork filed with the county last week includes their signatures on entitlement applications allowing the retailer to explore development.

County officials have said they are eager to see the run-down area along Soquel Drive developed, but Home Depot has formidable hurdles ahead — not the least of which is the anti-chain store sentiment that often surfaces in the left-leaning Santa Cruz area.

The Highway 1 crossing and the Soquel Drive and 41st Avenue area are already a maze of bumper-to-bumper weekend and late afternoon traffic.

Three of the five county supervisors said traffic is a top concern.

"It's not something I would be happy to see," said Supervisor Walt Symons of Aptos.

"I think it would be too big for the area. All you have to do is go down 41st Avenue on a Saturday. On weekend shopping hours it's jam-packed," Symons said.

The store would displace 16 residential units, two stores, two warehouses and other commercial improvements.

The businesses include B&B Small Engine Repair, Old Volks Home, Fabian's body shop, and Senate Furniture & Mattress.

Supervisor Jan Beautz said she has fielded about a dozen letters from opponents of the project.

She declined to comment on specific issues raised by the proposal. However, she was adamant about not granting leniency or exceptions.

"I want to make sure things are being done according to code," she said.

The issues are always the same, Beautz said.

"It's the noise, it's lights, it's deliveries at what times, it's what is the building itself going to look like, it's landscaping. ... How is it going to respect the surrounding neighbors?" Beautz said.

There will be environmental concerns as well.

A sensitive riparian habitat is adjacent to the proposed parking. "That's important," Beautz said.

The application indicated the anticipated hours of operation would be 5:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. weekdays, 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. Saturdays, and 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Sundays.

Under the proposal, Home Depot would build a main store with an adjacent outdoor garden center of 23,280 square feet.

Off-street parking would be provided for 607 oversized vehicles. There would be native landscaping and an access right-of-way. Greenbrae Lane to the south of the property would be widened and partially relocated.

Supervisor Tony Campos predicted traffic would be "a nightmare" and he is concerned that the store would hurt local businesses.

"I am not too much in favor of companies that put other people out of business," said Campos, who is meeting today with business owners who may be affected.

It is an argument the retail giant discounts.

"We've certainly been asked the question before and feel like after we open our stores nearby, retailers are pleased with the extra customers that we will bring to an area," Friend said.

"Home Depot is always somewhat cautious about opening new sites. We have a pretty extensive internal process. I think a really good testament to that is we have never had to close a store because it wasn't successful."

Several environmental groups have vocally opposed Home Depot's arrival.

The Santa Cruz Action Network, a coalition of area activists, wrote to Home Depot chief executive Arthur Blank last month asking the company to stay out of the community.

SCAN steering committee co-chairs Skip Spitzer and Bernice Belton said in the Aug. 30 letter that Home Depot is "a direct threat" to the existing economic community.

"We are considering pushing our local elected bodies to pass resolutions opposing the entry of Home Depot into our economy," the letter said.

"Thanks to the public outcry that you have stimulated it is likely that we may even be able to establish local ordinances to prevent 'big box store' development in the area such as those that you have already encountered in other localities."