

More congestion on the way

Soquel Village braces for Home Depot, Best Buy



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Traffic clutters Soquel Village on Friday evening. Some residents are worried Home Depot, a bigger Safeway and Best Buy will make matters worse.

Traffic Patterns

Residents fear the current tangle of cars will get worse

By GWEN MICKELSON
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SOQUEL — When rush-hour traffic bottlenecks each day into an impenetrable gridlock in the otherwise idyllic Soquel Village, Jim Greiner counts his blessings. That's because Greiner, a village resident who owns an interactive drumming business, has the kind of work that allows him to plan most of his car trips around the traffic mess.

But Greiner and others in Soquel Village are concerned about what will soon happen to their community, which is already feeling the effects of chronic congestion related to school traffic, Highway 1 overflow and previous decades' population growth.

Home-improvement Goliath Home Depot, a larger Safeway, a Best Buy



Denise Lundell of Flower Mill Florist in Soquel Village thinks the impact of traffic will be significant when the big chain stores set up shop.

electronics retailer and other commercial enterprises are set to open in a shopping center under renovation one-third of a mile west at 41st Avenue and Soquel Drive.

"I have nothing against chain

stores," said Greiner, who says he does his own share of shopping. "But it seems like an issue of planning."

The new Safeway is expected to open in early 2006, followed by Home Depot later that year; Best Buy will also open

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around then, or in spring 2007.

Redwood Square Shopping Center also will include two office and retail buildings, one 10,000 square feet, one 5,000 square feet.

Concerned residents and business owners in Soquel Village envision patrons of the new plaza leaving the shopping center, turning east on Soquel Drive and driving through their village to get to a highway entrance or for an alternate route to avoid Highway 1 congestion.

Residents and others have a chance to voice their concerns at the Planning Commission hearing Wednesday, which will address the Home Depot portion of the project.

Traffic

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'Close to gridlock'

Already, said Greiner, traffic is "dangerously close to a gridlock" four times a day, five days a week.

Among the neighbors he's spoken with about the issue, "a lot of people take a wait-and-see attitude, and some don't really think it's a bad idea, and some think it's a horrible idea."

Soquel Village, which includes the intersection of Porter Street and Soquel Drive, is a quiet residential area surrounding a tightly knit mix of cafes and restaurants, coffee shops, antiques stores, salons, bakeries, fitness establishments and professional offices.

Business owner Denise Lundell, of Flower Mill Florist at Soquel Drive and Daubenbiss Avenue, looks at the new development and the traffic reports that conclude the increase in traffic on Soquel isn't "significant," and wonders, "What world are they in?"

"It's going to be an absolute mess," Lundell said. "The only thing they're looking at is the tax revenue, not at the people who live here."

She sees the gridlock only worsening in the village as a result of the Redwood Square project, compounded by factors such as population growth and other development including the Rispin Mansion bed-and-breakfast in Capitola, where construction is scheduled to begin in the sum-

mer and end in 2007.

"Of course it will impact our business," said Lundell. "I don't go to crowded areas like the (Capitola) Mall because I don't want to fight the traffic."

Business at her floral shop dropped 50 percent in 1996, Lundell said, when the freeway overpass between Porter Street and Bay Avenue was built.

"People didn't come here because they closed off the intersection," she said. "That will happen again because people don't want to fight traffic."

Fear of the unknown

Such fears are "absolutely in good faith and I don't question anybody," said John McNellis of property development firm McNellis Partners in Palo Alto, which owns the property that Home Depot and Best Buy will occupy. "But it's like the fear of the unknown."

He doesn't want to belittle the issue, he said, "but I think the traffic guys actually know what they're doing."

An estimated 2,465 new daily trips are associated with the renovated plaza, according to Jack Sohriakoff, senior civil engineer with the county. But Sohriakoff said the number of extra daily trips doesn't mean much, since the traffic reports gauge impact on morning and evening peak levels rather than the daily figure.

Safeway and Home Depot have agreed to traffic improvements such as widening their side of 41st Avenue, putting in right-turn lanes at the first two driveways into the parking lot, creating a

bus pullout and making room for a bike lane, according to Sohriakoff.

A previous right-turn lane added to Soquel Drive and Porter Avenue eased the impacts on Soquel Drive for the project's traffic study.

Both Soquel Drive and Porter Street are busy thoroughfares, logging anywhere between 15,000-25,500 cars in various places near their intersection, according to average daily traffic counts by the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission. But they are not the busiest in the county.

That honor goes to stretches of 41st Avenue, Freedom Boulevard, Graham Hill Road, Main Street in Watsonville, Mount Hermon Road and Ocean Street, among others.

McNellis doesn't dispute that the new plaza will affect the surrounding area.

"There's no question there will be more traffic than now because now it's a graveyard," said McNellis.

But, he said, the particular mix of large retail outlets — a home-improvement store, grocery store and electronics store — will soften the impact of increased visits to the area because each has different peak hours and days, with Home Depot generally busiest in the early mornings, Safeway after work and Best Buy in the evenings and on weekends.

"I think the thing to remember is this is a wonderful opportunity for the county," he said. "These are going to be tremendous sales-tax generators."

Sales taxes would go to the

Sync or swim: Chamber tackles traffic solutions

One business group isn't giving lip service when it talks about syncing.

The Capitola-Soquel Chamber of Commerce, in an ongoing effort to address and resolve traffic concerns related to Redwood Square Shopping Center, made some headway in October toward synchronizing traffic lights on or near 41st Avenue and other congestion-easing measures.

The chamber met with the county Redevelopment Agency, Caltrans, the county and Capitola Public Works departments and business owners.

"They're going to look at making some extra lanes on 41st over the freeway, additional lanes on the freeway right in front of San Lorenzo Lumber and another traffic light in front of Round

Table Pizza," said Toni Castro, chamber director.

Other ideas include extending Cory Street and Cordelia Lane, now cul-de-sacs off of 41st Avenue, to Research Park Drive to alleviate some of the traffic on 41st Avenue.

The chamber also plans to look into solutions for potential traffic impact on Soquel Drive and on Porter Street, said Castro.

The Redevelopment Agency has researched the feasibility of the proposed ideas and will introduce the chamber and the other parties with some options. The chamber will set up another meeting with the business community to discuss the results, said Castro. The time and date of the meeting is not set.

— Gwen Mickelson

County Redevelopment Agency. No estimates have been made for this store, but Home Depot spokeswoman Kathryn Gallagher put the national average for sales taxes at \$500,000 per store.

Sales tax or not, the issue of increased gridlock in Soquel Village, and the resulting urge of frustrated drivers to bend traffic rules and rush to make it through signals, is a safety issue, said Tish Miller, owner of the Flower Mill building and director of the Soquel

Parking Association District.

Miller and others have brought up the issues of pedestrian safety and the ability of emergency workers to get through if traffic is stalled.

"I don't see any solutions," she said. "They're putting all that stuff in there and saying it's not going to be a traffic impact? That's a foolish statement."

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