

Home Depot passes a test

■ Preliminary proposal for Soquel store appears to meet standards.

By JENNIFER PITTMAN
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SOQUEL — A preliminary plan to build a 130,000-square-foot Home Depot store in Soquel appears to meet basic general plan designations, according to Santa Cruz County officials who have reviewed the proposal.

The county, however, is likely to demand an environmental impact report and an explanation of how the company would mitigate traffic and drainage problems inherent in such a large project.

The preliminary proposal to build a 107,148-square-foot structure with a 23,280-square-foot garden center calls for the demolition of 16 homes, two stores, two warehouses and several other commercial improvements in the Soquel Drive area at the north end of 41st Avenue.

The county's review found a number of major concerns, the largest being additional traffic in an area already clogged with traffic. County officials said they were concerned about the impact on traffic at 10 nearby intersections and highway ramps.

Other issues include air quality, drainage and the de-

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Proposal

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sign.

"It's hard to tell if it's in the realm of possibility," said Cathy Graves, a county planner who supervised Home Depot's request for a preliminary review. "It looks like an EIR may be needed."

With more than 802 stores in the United States and Canada, Home Depot is the world's largest home-improvement retailer and one of the 10 largest retailers in the United States. The \$30 billion company was founded in Atlanta in 1979 by company chairman Bernie Marcus and CEO Arthur Blank.

Home Depot has yet to reach agreements with all 10 commercial and residential property owners who company negotiators have been wooing for nearly five years.

"We feel we've got basic agreements with everybody," said Dan Evans, the Pacific Grove consultant coordinating the project for Home Depot. "There are always minor things."

Several of the landowners have signed contracts that grant the company entitlements to proceed with the project, Evans said.

The agreements are contingent, however, on all landowners signing contracts and closing deals at the same time. Evans said he wants all contracts signed by the end of the year.

"I think there are many challenges," Evans said.

He was quick to emphasize the company's willingness to work with the community and the county, but the project has enormous political and environmental hurdles to clear before a public hearing is held. Santa Cruz-area residents have been quick to fight regional chain stores wishing to locate here.



'My office has received numerous complaints regarding the visual impacts created by the Circuit City/Toys-R-Us commercial building.

— County Supervisor Jan Beautz, box-store design opponent

Graves said county officials are concerned about the store's appearance.

"It's not only a very busy intersection, it's a very visible location. Whatever goes in there, we would want it to look like it fits into the area," Graves said. "I know from just from seeing them that they have a good designs and are capable of responding to that."

In a written response to the preliminary plan, county Supervisor Jan Beautz voiced numerous issues beyond the obvious traffic problems, including drainage issues and protection of a nearby creek.

Beautz was also not pleased with the proposed box-store design, calling it "completely inappropriate for this site" and requesting plans for a more visually pleasing alternative.

"My office has received numerous complaints regarding the visual impacts created by the Circuit City/Toys-R-

Us commercial building," she said.

Several county supervisors, including Walt Symons, Mardi Wormhoudt and Tony Campos also have raised concerns about the project.

The company is testing a new store format in Georgia that is supposed to be brighter and more spacious than its other locations. The new model features showrooms for lighting, kitchens and doors, and

separate areas for hardware and design materials. The new store is 7,000 square feet larger than the average Home Depot store, allowing for wider aisles.

Evans said the preliminary review was a way to get an early look at the challenges ahead.

"It allows us to be up front and know what those obstacles are and address them," Evans said.

The company is preparing a response to Beautz's concerns.

"We're more than willing to work with the neighborhood and community and staff, and to be good neighbors," Evans said. "We think they are surmountable to where we will be successful. We're hoping to be able to open doors hopefully in 2001."

Home Depot representatives have met with the owners of several businesses that would be displaced by the project. In individual meetings, they discussed relocation challenges in a community with few available spots for auto shops.

No promises were made, said Anthony Guerrero, owner of Old Volks Home, who has worried for years where he would take his 20-year-old business.

"They said that they were going to try to help us, that this was part of what they told us in the beginning," Guerrero said. "They said that they were showing that they did look around (for relocation parcels), but the rest of it was just to make it look a little prettier. It was not really a helpful thing. We're still in limbo. They still won't commit."

For business owners just down the street, who have only month-to-month leases for their warehouse location, the feeling is that Home Depot will eventually come.

"This is going to happen, it's just a matter of how many hoops they have to go through," said Bill Bruce, co-owner of B&B Small Engine repair. For a retail operation involved in noisy repairs, there's not much industrial space available in the county, Bruce said.