

Opponents of Target store out in force

Planning Commission delays decision on new shopping center

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WATSONVILLE — The Watsonville Planning Commission last night postponed a decision on the proposed Target shopping center after hearing from a host of community groups opposed to the project.

The 272,500-square-foot shopping center, dubbed The Overlook, would be located on the Console property, a 27-acre parcel along Main Street between Ramsay Park and the slough. Target would move into a 96,000-square-foot store, the largest building in the center.

The Planning Commission will have to make a recommendation to the City Council on the project. The Planning Commission will take up the matter again at its next regularly scheduled meeting, which is Aug. 7 at 7 p.m. at City Hall.

The audience at last night's meeting spilled out from the

Council chambers to the lobby. A cross-section of community groups showed up to air their concerns. They included representatives from labor, environmental, human rights, housing and religious groups.

One of the main concerns for many was how the shopping center would affect the downtown business district and businesses along the Freedom Boulevard corridor. Don Orosco, of DBO Development of Pebble Beach, the company heading the project, said estimated annual sales at the shopping center could top the \$64 million mark. This means more than half of a million dollars in revenue for the city.

Although the shopping center would bring in needed revenue and create about 360 full-time jobs, it could spell disaster for downtown and Freedom Boulevard businesses, some speakers said.

"What is good for the city

See TARGET, back of section

TARGET

From page 1

treasury is not necessarily best for the city," said Joe Fahey, of the Teamsters Union, Local 912. He said the Targets in Hollister and Salinas were built with non-union workers. He wanted to know if the Target here would also be built with non-union workers.

Jerry Hernandez, executive director of Main Street Watsonville, said the city should carefully weigh the effects of the shopping center on the city's businesses. When other cities have allowed a large shopping center to be built away from the downtown area, the economic consequences on the downtown have "not been very positive overall," he said.

The needs of a shopping center and the needs of a downtown should be carefully considered, Hernandez said.

"There's a delicate balance that has to be maintained," Hernandez said.

Hernandez pointed to Gilroy as an example of where this balance was not observed. After a large group of discount outlets opened along Highway 101, the downtown area was also deserted. He called that example "a model of failure." He said he believed some small businesses will go out of business if the shopping center is built.

With Gottschalks opening next month, downtown seems to be gaining "momentum," Hernandez said. Building the shopping center now could undermine that momentum, he said.

Long's drugstore, which has a downtown store, may be one of the tenants at the shopping center. There is talk that Lucky food store, which has a store on Freedom Boulevard, would also be moving to the shopping center. But a city official said Long's owns its downtown property and is not likely to move its downtown store. It may, however, open a second store at the shopping center.

Other community members pointed to vacant stores at some of the city's shopping centers. A resident living on Terry Loop, which is about half a block from the proposed shopping center, wanted to know if the city really needs another shopping center when some of the existing shopping center's have so many vacant stores. Was the city on a "building and abandoning trend?" he asked.

About half of the Console property was designated for high-density housing in the city's general plan, which extends to 2005. About 300 units were planned for that property. The City Council will have to rezone the property to allow the shopping center. Some questioned how the general plan could be changed so easily when the city has long experienced a shortage of housing.

Celia Organista, director of Adelante, a non-profit group in Watsonville that helps the poor, said Watsonville is in dire need of affordable housing. Although housing on the Console property would have only been a drop in the bucket, it would have been better than nothing.

"When you are dying of thirst every drop counts, and this community is dying of thirst," Organista said.

Commissioner Joseph Parker asked if those two EIRs could be incorporated into a new and more comprehensive EIR, one that would take into account the economic impact the shopping center would have on Watsonville businesses.

Anyone interested in further discussion on the shopping center is invited to attend a meeting Saturday at 10:30 a.m. at 406 Main St., Room No. 208.