

Safeway expansion is approved

SANTA CRUZ — The Safeway grocery store at Rancho del Mar Shopping Center can expand its operations, planning commissioners decided Wednesday.

It took two hours to hammer out, but commissioners gave approval after agreeing that Rancho del Mar shopping owner James Fenton will have to pay \$200,000 in road improvements.

Fenton, who has owned the shopping center for 25 years, is guiding the project through the planning process. The commission's action is final unless appealed.

Safeway will add 5,015 square feet to its store, providing room for a beer and wine section, natural foods department, delicatessen, cheese table and bakery.

Twelve commercial buildings next to Safeway already have been vacated, giving the grocery store another 6,702-square-foot area in which to expand. The total renovated floor space will increase from 20,337 square feet to 31,612 square feet.

The stumbling block to a fast resolution was the amount Fenton will be required to pay into a traffic improvement fund.

After months of study, Traffic Planner Ron Marquez said the county has decided to widen Soquel Drive from State Park Drive to the railroad trestle at Spreckels Drive, installing a two-way left-turn lane, and building sidewalks and bikeways.

He estimated the final cost at \$600,000 and predicted the road work won't begin for five to seven years.

Fenton will deposit \$40,000 in the county's traffic account for five years until it reaches \$200,000, commissioners decided.

Fenton challenged that amount, saying his shopping center is only one-quarter of the frontage road space. He argued he should only be charged an equal amount, not one-third of the costs.

A half-dozen speakers, many of them Fenton's tenants, backed his point of view.

But Marquez said Fenton's contribution was factored not only on how much the shopping center fronts Soquel Drive, but the new traffic generated by the expansion. Under that formula, Rancho del Mar gets more car trips than any other business in that area.

Fenton urged commissioners to let him pay the \$200,000 in installments and deposit the money in an account in his name, where he could collect the interest.

However, commissioners rejected that, saying that the county's normal practice is to put the funding into a special account in the county's name. That way, any interest that accrues will go toward construction.

Fenton replied, "We don't want to put it into a fund that goes all over the place." He asked — and received — an assurance from the commission that the money will be earmarked for the area in front of the shopping center.