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San Jose City Council approves mega-retail center in Almaden area

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Despite concerns from a handful of residents, environmentalists and others that a proposed mega-retail center on one of the last major swaths of open land in San Jose will negatively affect traffic and quality of life, the San Jose City Council on Tuesday night easily approved rezoning the area for such a project.

In a 7-to-1 vote, the council agreed to change the designation of about 45 acres of land on the northeast corner of Highway 85 and Almaden Expressway to commercial use only.

The council also denied a recent appeal of the project's environmental impact report by an adjacent landowner concerned about a new traffic median that he thinks will affect some nearby businesses.

Only Councilman Kansen Chu was opposed each time, siding with the affected business owners.

Councilwomen Rose Herrera, Nancy Pyle and Madison Nguyen were absent.

Saying the appellant's traffic issues were not significant enough to halt the project, Mayor Chuck Reed supported the zoning change because he believes the new retail center will help boost retail sales tax revenue in the city. Reed estimates the city loses up to 20 percent of retail sales tax revenue that now goes to other cities where San Jose residents shop.

"We've asked staff to aggressively pursue that (issue). ... This is a project that will help us do that," Reed said. "When you compare this project to what is across the street, I would say it's vastly superior to most of the shopping centers we have. Staff and planning have done a good job working with this site."

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Early on, the city's planning staff had successfully pushed for changes to the project, including more landscaping, fewer parking spaces, smaller tenant buildings and a family-friendly "village green" area. City Councilman Don Rocha, who represents the area, also responded to neighbors' concerns by getting preliminary funding approved for a pedestrian bridge that will provide access over the nearby Guadalupe

River.

Rocha praised the doggedness of the nearby neighborhood associations for their suggestions for improvements, calling their work "impressive." But he also gave a public nod to Gerry DeYoung, president of Ruth and Going, which is designing the site, for responding to the public's concerns, as well as the engineering firm's willingness to invest in San Jose "at this economic time."

"Not a lot of folks are putting up private dollars to make an investment as significant as this," said Rocha.

Plans for the development, called the Almaden Ranch Retail Center, have been held up by those who say another large retail mecca in the area is unnecessary

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and will generate an even greater traffic nightmare than they say exists now.

The site is located across the street from a Best Buy and Walmart, adjacent to a shopping center that contains a Safeway store, among other retailers, and a larger shopping center with a Costco and Barnes & Noble less than a mile south on Almaden Expressway.

But city planners say current and proposed traffic light and road improvements, including an extension of Cherry Avenue from Almaden Expressway to Sanchez Drive, will reduce congestion.

And while the project would increase the area's retail density, San Jose officials predict the 400,000 square feet of retail space will become a regional center for many South San Jose shoppers.

Depending on the number of tenants, the city's Office of Economic Development believes the site, which could accommodate at least 30 retailers, both small and large, could generate from \$500,000 to \$750,000 in annual sales tax. City officials also think the site could create jobs for about

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700 workers and hundreds of construction jobs.

Unlike more traditional shopping centers, city planners say the Almaden Ranch Retail Center's appeal is its pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly retail development, different from those in the surrounding area.

While it will include some big and medium-size box retailers, it also will feature plenty of smaller stores and restaurants that will be closer to each other -- accented by wider sidewalks to encourage more walking and bicycling in the development. A village green area for outdoor events, such as a farmers market or live music, creates an important "sense of place," planners say.

Planning Director Joe Horwedel called it an opportunity "to take a typical shopping center and really turn it into something different."

Still, there are objections. In a three-page letter it sent last week to the mayor and council, the Loma Prieta Chapter of the Sierra Club asked the council not to approve the new zoning, saying the project would only provide short-term economic benefits.

The group also said the project goes against the spirit of the latest General Plan, and that increased traffic from the site will generate more greenhouse gases.

"I urge you not to support the Almaden Ranch Retail Project," Judy Lindow, a San Jose resident and member of the Loma Prieta Chapter told the council. "I think the arguments are very clear."

Contact Tracy Seipel at 408 275-0140.

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