



Wal-Mart jumps first hoop

Board revises land-use plan

By Ginger Livingston

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The Greenville Planning and Zoning Commission on Tuesday night signed off on a land-use change that could lead to a Wal-Mart Supercenter at 10th Street and Port Terminal Road.

The commission voted 6-2 to recommend the City Council change the land-use plan designation of the area to a commercial category from the three designations currently making up the 52-acre area.

Planning members Godfrey Bell, Don Baker, Len Tozer, Shelley Basnight, Tim Randall and Robert Ramey voted for the recommendation; Tony Parker and James Wilson voted against it.

The commission's vote went against the city planning staff recommendation that the proposal be denied.

"It's not that there shouldn't be any development," said Chantae Gooby, staff planner. "It's just a matter of scale."

The project's opponents remain undeterred.

"This is just one little bump," said Marion Blackburn, one of the leaders of the opposition, told the group that gathered after the vote.

About 175 people, most residents of River Hills subdivision, attended the meeting and opposed the plan.

There were about dozen other people at the meeting representing the project developers and the owners of the property in question.

WRS Inc., based in Mount Pleasant, S.C., wants the change to develop Port Terminal Commons on 85 acres. A Wal-Mart Supercenter is to be the centerpiece of the development.

The area being considered, which includes the location of the former Cliff's Seafood Restaurant, is across from Lowe's Home Improvement. The current land use plan has the property designated for office/institutional/multi-family, medium density residential and conservation/open space.

Gooby said those uses allow for a graduated change, from the dense commercial development at 10th Street and Greenville Boulevard to the residential communities that extend east into the county.

Gooby said there is no north-south access to the area, because Port Terminal Road dead ends at the Tar River. She said an area east of the site, at 10th Street-N.C. 33 and Portertown Road, already has denser commercial development and north-south and east-west road access. She also pointed out several other suitable locations for the complex.

Jim Price, a vice president with WRS Inc., said the project would bring 750 jobs to Greenville. He promised buffers would be built between the development and River Hills to dampen the noise and visual disturbance. He said 49 percent of the property would be put under a conservation easement which would keep it undeveloped.

"We're looking at 30,000 people out there we believe are being underserved," Price said, referring to residents in eastern Pitt County.

He added that these people must drive on a crowded Greenville Boulevard to shop. He cited statistics from city staff that just under 60 percent of the traffic on East 10th Street comes from the east.

Price said he understands many people living in that area prefer traveling to Washington, N.C., to shop instead of slogging through traffic.

Phil Dixon, a Greenville attorney representing the development group, said the project would cost \$60 million, boosting the city tax rolls.

"We're better off than so many places in eastern North Carolina, but yet we have people crying for help," he said.

Blackburn said the group didn't oppose commercial development in the community but didn't want to see it develop in a haphazard manner.

"These jobs and that revenue will come if we situate that development in a proper location," she said.

Blackburn presented the commission with a petition signed by 170 River Hills residents who opposed the project. She told commissioners that the buffer Price proposed could not be enforced, because it's not legal for a developer to make private contracts with the neighborhood. Later in the meeting, City Attorney Dave Holec, answering a commissioner's question, said the city couldn't require the developer to install a buffer that went beyond the city's current requirements.

Blackburn said one of the neighborhood's main worries is the possibility of a road linking the neighborhood directly to the shopping center. Shoppers would drive through the neighborhood, which has a large amount of foot and bicycle traffic, especially children.

Charles M. da Silva, co-president of the River Hills Neighborhood Association, said the project is better suited for another location.

"This area was never intended for this level of commercial activity," he said. "There are other parcels the city's planning department has recommended to WRS."

River Hills resident Dale Guckian said no one should think the project was being undertaken to benefit the residents, that WRS Inc. and Wal-Mart are the entities that will reap the rewards.

John Hylant said while the city's planning staff and the developers said the added traffic generated by the development doesn't exceed the highway's capacity, it will make it more difficult to make left turns out of River Hills, which was annexed by Greenville this year.

The commission's recommendation will go to the City Council, which must hold a public hearing before voting to finalize the change or to reject it, Holec said.

If the council approves the change, the developers must return to the planning and zoning commission to seek a zoning change to proceed with the project. That involves a public hearing with the commission and then on to the City Council for a public hearing and vote.

After that, site plans will be submitted to the commission for approval, Holec said.

Blackburn promised the group would take its protest to the City Council on Nov. 6.

"We are going to continue as a neighborhood, not just as a neighborhood, but a city, to stick together so we can make our own decisions about growth so we can protect our neighborhoods," she said.

Blackburn is a former reporter for The Daily Reflector and wife of Greg Eans, the newspaper's associate editor of photography and graphics.

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