

NE Neighborhood News

By Lee Perlman

Development news

82nd big box pros and cons gear for battle

Plans for a "big box" retail development, including a possible Wal-Mart, at a former land-fill on Northeast 82nd Avenue are moving toward a confrontation.

Smart Centres of Canada is seeking a conditional use permit to allow them to build 240,000 square feet of retail, including a single structure comprising 190,000 square feet of space, on the 10-acre property at Northeast Siskiyou Street, across from Madison High School. (The property is zoned for industrial use and the zoning code would normally limit commercial uses to a total of 60,000 square feet.) Having asked the city to place the matter on hold for several months, Smart Centres is now asking them to proceed. Accordingly, a hearing has been set for 9 a.m. October 1 before city hearings officer Gregory Frank at 1900 S.W. 4th Ave.

The city normally expects such hearings to last two to three hours. In this case, Frank has reserved the entire working day for the case, and October 3 as well. He will hear it in the second-floor meeting room, the largest in the building.

Under the Type III review process that governs this case, Frank's decision can be appealed to the Portland City Council, and most observers think this is inevitable no matter what the decision is. It is likely to arrive there near year's end or early January.

The case has generated an unprecedented organizing effort by the Madison South and Roseway neighborhood associations. Between them, they say, they have obtained pledges of support to oppose the development from 1,400 households, have generated 400 letters to city planner Sylvia Cate, who is charged with preparing a recommendation to Frank, and have sold hundreds of "Save Madison South" and "Save Roseway" lawn signs. The two neighborhoods' National Night Out party at Glenhaven Park, attracting somewhere between 150 and 200 people, doubled as a pep rally for the campaign, and about 30 individuals held signs for motorists passing on Northeast 82nd Avenue to see.

The groups also have raised several thousand dollars for the cause. The latest fundraising effort, conceived by avid bicyclist Amy Loftus, consisted of setting up a roadside tent near the summit of Rocky Butte Road and asking passing cyclists to make contributions to participate in a drawing for prizes contributed by local merchants. The groups have used the funds to retain attorney Ken Helm and traffic consultant Greenlight Engineering to help them make their case. (The projected traffic impact of the project seems likely to be the biggest issue in the case.)

The possibility of a Wal-Mart has been a powerful organizing tool. Smart Centre spokespeople say they have not selected a tenant for the space, but Madison South's Frank Walsh says that Wal-Marts are the anchor tenants in two-thirds of Smart Centre's developments. However, the campaign organizers say they would be opposed regardless of who the tenant turned out to be.

Noting that other neighborhoods have had to confront this issue, Madison South's Dawn Tryon told the Glenhaven rally, "We're sick of big-box

stores bringing in lots of traffic. We're sick of big-box stores destroying our neighborhood businesses. We're sick of big-box stores destroying our neighborhoods. We deserve better than this."

Smart Centres is preparing for the hearing as well. They have hired veteran land-use lawyer Steve Pfeiffer, and traffic consultant Kittelson and Associates. They also are reportedly doing outreach to and seeking support from business associations and churches.

The two neighborhoods also have done some visioning, asking what residents would like to see on the property instead of a big-box store. They say they have attempted to discuss alternative plans with Smart Centre representatives, but that the company has indicated it is committed to its current plans.

Roseway's Lauren Schmidt, who has been particularly active in the counter-planning effort, told the rally, "There's a good side to this. We're getting a lot of people together, and this is a chance to start thinking about what we'd like to see."

Expanding on this, Tryon said, "We're tired of being dumped on! We want something positive for our neighborhood. We're asking for a master plan for 82nd Avenue. This is an opportunity to shape the whole area for the next 50 years."