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Old ways won't do for residents near 82nd

Thursday, October 11, 2007

By Erin Hoover Barnett
The Oregonian Staff

Neighbors' fight against a feared Wal-Mart at Northeast 82nd and Siskiyou has been a clash between old and new visions for the corridor.

Last week, the new-vision proponents gained ground. Now they're under pressure to deliver.

SmartCentres, a Canadian shopping center developer, withdrew its application Oct. 2 to build a retail center. A spokesman says SmartCentres will return with a proposal that takes into account city and neighborhood concerns, which range from scale to traffic.

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The original proposal seemed to neighbors like more of the same old attitude about 82nd Avenue: an Eastport Plaza-style center for a high-traffic, freeway-accessible, working-class area. No tenants had been chosen, but neighbors believed it would be a Wal-Mart because SmartCentres often partners with the retailer.

But the proposal ran smack into a changing perception of the Madison South and Roseway neighborhoods. New, more affluent residents are joining longtime residents who believe 82nd Avenue should be included in city goals for walkable, community-friendly neighborhoods.

"We're trying to rebuild this area in sync with Portland's plan," says Tyler Whitmire, president of the Roseway Neighborhood Association.

Michael Downing, a real estate agent in the area for 35 years but not involved in the big-box debate, says the neighborhood is slowly coming up.

"The housing stock is very much the same as closer in," Downing says. The area is "convenient to a lot of services, so I definitely think the neighborhood has a very good future."

Neighbors want to see shops, offices, housing and maybe an educational institution on the 25-acre site, a former landfill. They want gathering and shopping places that become a focal point for the neighborhood. They'd also like to see a project play off the area's mix of cultures.

The project is emerging as a referendum on how much the city -- and the landowner -- value the neighborhood.

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By Benjamin Brink
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Page 2 of 2

Jax Zumwalt has lived in the neighborhood since 1954 and remembers the site's checkered history. In the 1960s, it was a gravel pit and pond where a boy drowned. Then the city turned it into a privately owned dump, first intended for yard debris but later including garbage. Zumwalt says yards and plants died as toxins seeped into the groundwater.

"The smell was absolutely horrendous," says Zumwalt, a retired truck driver. "I had flies in my house."

After the dump was filled, a driving range opened. Zumwalt collected buckets of golf balls that rained down on his and his neighbors' homes, often breaking windows.

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He says the city wouldn't listen to concerns. When he tried to organize neighbors, few wanted to get involved. "I used to go around, and people would slam the door in my face," he says.

Now he's encouraged to see new and old residents come together as Save Madison South with lawn signs, brochures, rallies and fundraisers to fight building a big-box store. And this time, public officials are keenly interested. City and state officials' concerns about traffic tie-ups the project would generate appear to have been a major factor in its undoing.

Save Madison South's board is holding a brainstorming meeting at 7 tonight at the Central Northeast Neighbors' office, Northeast 87th and Sandy to plot its next steps.

"It is very clear and apparent that there is a lot of positive, dynamic energy that has been generated by the group's efforts, and channeling it into building the kind of neighborhood we want and expect to be a part of for the next 50 years is even more critical," says Dawn Tryon, a leader active in the effort.

Neighbors were pleased when landowner Mike Hashem called Whitmire after the developer withdrew the proposal last week. Hashem says he has high hopes for SmartCentres, which has the deep pockets needed to do a good project.

Whitmire says they must be strategic. "We would love to think they will build what we really want," he says, "but we know there will have to be compromises made by all sides."

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