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Madison plans get 'no' vote

NE 82nd Avenue - Neighbors want to know a shopping project's anchor tenant

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The developer seeking to build a big-box store and smaller shops across Northeast 82nd Avenue from Madison High School didn't exactly get a warm reception at a Madison South Neighborhood Association meeting.

An overflow crowd voted almost unanimously last week to oppose the plans, at least until SmartCentres, a Canadian shopping center developer, identifies the major tenant. Residents cited concerns about traffic and property values -- and the possibility that Wal-Mart would be the main retailer.

If Portland planning officials and City Council members agree, it could be a long time before any construction occurs on the 26-acre former landfill. The site is one of the city's largest close-in undeveloped properties zoned for commercial uses.

The developer, based in Vaughan, Ontario, needs a conditional-use permit from the city to go ahead with plans for 240,000 square feet of retail and commercial space. Current zoning allows for 60,000 square feet.

SmartCentres' project manager, Shawn Fujiki, told skeptical neighbors that a 60,000-square-foot development wouldn't generate enough rental income to justify the costs and risks of buying and building on the former landfill.

Because the site is prone to settling, buildings will have to rest on costly pilings driven 80 feet down into bedrock, Fujiki said.

Fujiki also said there's a "chicken and egg" dilemma on identifying the major tenant. It would be "extremely unlikely" for his company to get a commitment from a big retailer without a near-guarantee that the project would be approved, he said.

SmartCentres' plan calls for a 180,000-square-foot building and 15 to 20 smaller shops.

Fujiki said SmartCentres isn't negotiating with a potential occupant for the big building, but he acknowledged that Wal-Mart is a logical candidate. The retailer has stores at two-thirds of the company's shopping centers in Canada. But Fujiki said SmartCentres has relationships with nearly all the big-box retailers.

Sylvia Cate, the city planner overseeing the conditional-use review, said such applications rarely identify building occupants. "But I can appreciate that neighbors might have deeply held feelings about the types of companies that might occupy the site," she said.

The project doesn't require the neighborhood association's endorsement, but the city planning official overseeing public hearings must consider neighborhood concerns.

Neighbors who object to the center complained about both the potential of Wal-Mart to hurt nearby small businesses and about the sheer size of the proposed store.

"We already have all the big-box stores within a 10-minutes ' drive," Craig Clark said, adding that he thinks a grocery store would be a nice fit.

Sean Batty, board member with the adjacent Roseway Neighborhood Association, said his neighborhood also opposes SmartCentres' plans. "They've been telling us what they want to do; we've been saying we

don't like it," he said.

Once the conditional-use application is complete, public hearings will be held. A hearings officer's decision could be appealed to the City Council.

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