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We say 'no' to Petaluma Home Depot

Residents see traffic problems, pollution on the horizon if store is approved at former Kmart site

By JANICE CADER THOMPSON, ALI GAYLORD AND KRIS REBILLOT

As residents of Petaluma's east side, we are raising alarms in regards to Home Depot's proposal to tear down the now-empty Kmart in the Plaza North Shopping Center on North McDowell, and replace it with one of their standard-sized stores. We believe the project would be a health hazard to our community and would not support Petaluma's long-range climate goals nor align with a general plan that we hope will encourage active, mixed-use developments.

Imagine the Rohnert Park Home Depot — which is located in a very industrial area — plopped down on an already traffic-burdened North McDowell. This car-centric new development is likely to be the final nail in the east side's traffic coffin.

If this project goes forward, the increased traffic coming off Highway 101 will pose increased safety and pollution risks for east side neighborhoods as congestion balloons. The turn lanes from McDowell are inadequate for increased traffic and dangerous for bikers and pedestrians. Existing infrastructure on McDowell, already in bad shape, is almost certain to be damaged by more semi-trucks. The main delivery driveway into the store will be built next to existing senior housing; semis will pass below their windows. Getting in and out of the popular Tuesday morning Farmer's Market will become even more perilous and increased congestion will deter the use of the Lynch Creek trail as an important bike and pedestrian cross-town connector.

The Home Depot proposal would not just replace one store for another. Kmart was a consumer products store that had little truck traffic and a smaller customer base than a much larger new store. Unlike Friedman's just to the north, it won't be built in a shopping center that was designed to handle the traffic to surrounding uses. Continuing the same land use patterns that have already proven detrimental to our community, and that have produced failed big box stores, is not what should be redeveloped in this location.

We say "Yes" to re-imagining this site To those who argue that the empty Kmart is a blight on the city — we agree. We encourage a new use for this site that will provide what the community actually needs, such as housing or space for a medical clinic, smaller local businesses or a child care facility.

We are particularly drawn to the promise of new housing. By redeveloping this site with housing, including upgraded infrastructure focused on pedestrian and cyclist safety and sensible traffic solutions, this site could be a catalyst to transform this downtrodden part of the east side. Located within walking distance of groceries, a pharmacy, the Community Center, parks, playgrounds, schools, and the Lynch Creek Trail, the site provides ideal amenities for residents. People would be closer to jobs; the bus line on McDowell promises a quick ride to the Smart Train and downtown. It all adds up to an easy reduction in VMT – vehicle miles traveled.

Petaluma needs to produce 1,910 housing units over the next eight years to meet its Regional Housing Needs Assessment target. Redeveloping existing auto-centric (and failing) big box locations would allow the city to get closer to achieving these

housing goals without extending out into the Urban Growth Boundary.

What to do? As a community we can encourage the City Council to take steps that could potentially stop the project in its tracks. A recent amendment to the zoning code, which allows the city to require an environmental impact report, makes this possible. This option was not available to the Council when faced with Safeway's plan to build a mega-gas-station on South Washington. Citizens successfully blocked Safeway's plans. We can have a similar outcome when it comes to Home Depot.

What can you do to help? Write the mayor and City Council members (citycouncil@cityofpetaluma.org) asking them to do the right thing. Reach out to the General Plan Advisory Committee (PlanPetaluma@CityofPetaluma.org) and attend a GPAC Meeting. Show up when the project comes before the Planning Commission. Show up when it comes in front of City Council.

We don't have to roll over and let this project happen.

Janice Cader Thompson, Ali Gaylord and Kris Rebillot serve on Petaluma's General Plan Advisory Committee.