

Developer presses on with proposal Walkertown council next to consider rezoning request rejected by planning board

By Wesley Young
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Undaunted by a second rejection from the town's planning board, a developer said last week that he will press ahead with a plan to put a McDonald's restaurant and Walgreens at a busy intersection.

The planning board voted 3-2 to deny the rezoning request that is needed for the project to proceed.

The Walkertown Town Council will consider the rezoning request.

Developer Michael Kelley, a partner with Kelley-Austin Properties, said after the planning-board meeting that he has spent too much time and energy working on the project to turn back now.

Kelley wants to put the businesses on a 2.8-acre lot at the southwest corner of N.C. 66 and U.S. 158. Although no one has expressed opposition to the businesses, many residents said they worry about the location.

At its meeting on Dec. 5, 2006, the planning board voted 2-1 to recommend that the council reject Kelley's rezoning request.

During the planning board's public hearing, Kelley said he has tried to make changes to his plans to deal with some of the residents' concerns

The project would be on a smaller site. It was originally proposed for about 4 acres, but is now planned for slightly less than 3 acres.

No office zoning would be next door. Kelley's original proposal would have an additional 7 acres to the southwest of the site site zoned for office and residential use. The idea was to provide for a buffer between the commercial businesses and nearby houses.

Under the new proposal, the lane beside the McDonald's would be left as residential.

The number of parking spaces was reduced from 143 to 128. A storm-water pond would be off-site to the west.

By putting the drainage pond off the property, the developer would not have to ask the town to use up any of its limited allocation of land set aside for high-density development under watershed regulations.

Kelley said he also would spend between \$300,000 and \$400,000 extra to extend the widening of N.C. 66 from his development to the entrance of Whitehall Village, a residential subdivision being built.

"I've listened very closely," Kelley said. "I know that traffic is the big issue."

Patrick Hennigan, the developer of Walkertown Commons, a shopping center across the street, said he was neutral about the project. Hennigan said that by helping make the intersection more of a main center for Walkertown, his center would benefit.

Hennigan also suggested that the businesses might consider lots in his center if the town rejects the corner rezoning.

Harold Warner of Walkertown said that drivers would use Martin Street and Bellaire Circle as cut-throughs if the businesses develop on the corner.

Chuck Anas, another resident, said that trucks traveling at 55 mph should be a concern at a "dangerous and busy intersection."

Coleman Alderson faulted traffic studies for not taking into account the future effect of the proposed Northern Beltway traffic through Walkertown, as well as the traffic impact of a new high school, as proposed for Walkertown.

But Larry Marshall, a planning-board member who supports the corner development, said that Walkertown doesn't have major traffic problems.

"We use that against anything we don't want in town," he said. "I don't think you need to keep bringing up the traffic problem."

Al Slater, another planning-board member who supports the project, criticized Marilyn Martin, a fellow board member and development opponent, for voting on the issue. Martin lives on Martin Street and had excused herself from voting on a previous vote.

But this time, the town attorney told members that Martin could not excuse herself because she didn't have a direct interest in how the project turned out.

Peggy Leight, the chairwoman of the planning board, said that there are many other highway business sites near the intersection.

"I don't think saying 'no' to this plan means they won't be here," Leight said. "They have looked at other properties ... they will look for a new site."

Don Whitaker said that the developers have "done a great job" but said that the project needs to go on a better site.

Leight, Martin and Whitaker voted to recommend that the council reject the rezoning request. Slater and Marshall voted to recommend that the council approve it.

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