

Beachcomber "Design Center EIR Certified," September 1, 2006

Home Depot Design Center EIR Certified

By Cindy Frye

After four hours of public testimony by more than 50 citizens on a controversial commercial development planned for East Long Beach, four of the City's seven planning commissioners unanimously certified the environmental impact report for a Home Depot Design Center during the commission meeting on Thursday, Aug. 17.

The quorum of commissioners quietly listened as each speaker expressed their hopes, or fears, about building a "big-box" development at the long-abandoned tank farm at the intersection of Loynes Drive and Studebaker Road. The development is planned to house more than 139,500 square feet of a home design and garden center, 12,000 square feet of retail space and a 6,000 square-foot family-style restaurant.

Since the project's inception, a growing number of residents living in nearby neighborhoods, especially those living in upscale University Park Estates, have voiced concerns about their quality of life being disrupted by increased traffic, noise and air pollution, hazardous materials exposure, detrimental effects on the adjacent wetlands and the increased demand on public services and infrastructure.

Angela Reynolds, the City's Environmental and Advance Planning Officer, addressed some of those concerns during the opening moments of the hearing as she explained that nothing would be built at the privately-owned 16-acre site until all hazardous materials were remediated, the "long-standing problems in University Parks Estates" regarding the over-burdened sewer system would be remedied by installing new 10-inch sewer lines, almost \$3 million in traffic flow improvements would attempt to alleviate some of the traffic congestion and, in addressing the wetlands issue, Reynolds made it clear that the wetlands are not part of the development site. She noted that the various improvements would be paid for by the developer.

Yet, many of the speakers criticized the environmental document. University Park Estates resident Janice Dahl, the first speaker of the afternoon, said the EIR was "deficient" and questioned how the city would pay for lawsuits resulting from accidents on the rollercoaster-type ride along Loynes Drive. Others questioned the validity of the traffic study and the need for another "big-box" retailer in an area where a number of mom-and-pop type businesses could be adversely affected if the national retailer came to the eastside.

Some of the speakers, such as Spinnaker Bay resident Hank Snapper, support the retailer's interest in developing the site, saying a rumored moratorium on large commercial retailers would "send the wrong message" to business owners and isn't a good idea.

Teresa Bixby, another University Park Estates resident, said as a PTA member at Kettering Elementary School, which is about a half mile from the site, the school could benefit from additional green space as part of a 30 percent requirement for open space for new development. She also said Home Depot listened to the parent's request for a "family-friendly" environment and thinks the Home Depot proposal "is a superior alternative" to what could go on the site. The site currently

is zoned for industrial uses, which has stirred rumors of placing a container terminal on the property.

Despite the pleas to reconsider developing the site with the Home Depot Design Center, Commissioner Charles Winn made a motion to approve the EIR and its supporting documents. "I want to compliment all those who have participated, for or against" the project, he said before making his motion.

He said he "understood" the traffic concerns but added that creating jobs, which have been estimated at 218 permanent positions, and anticipating that the development, including the Home Depot Design Center and the other proposed businesses, will contribute more than \$600,000 to the city's general fund each year, makes the project more appealing.

"I make the motion to accept the Home Depot, which is difficult to do because I have a lot of friends who oppose it, but I do recommend we make a motion to approve," Winn said. Commissioner Mitchell Rouse seconded Winn's motion and commissioners Leslie Gentile and Chairman Matthew Jenkins agreed. Commissioners Morton Stuhlbarg, Charles Greenberg and Nick Sramek were absent from the hearing.

The next step for the project would be the City Council's approval of the certification of the EIR and related documents.