

Press-Telegram Editorial, July 9, 2006

### **Approve The Home Depot**

City would benefit by adding jobs, sales taxes, and shopping choices

Long Beach planners are soliciting input on a request by The Home Depot to build a design center on the Eastside. Since they're asking for opinions, here's ours: Let them build it.

The city should seize the chance to let a developer tear down an ugly, fenced-in oil tank farm and replace it with the nation's No. 2 retailer, two smaller stores and an upscale restaurant. The private property on Studebaker Road and Loynes Drive is zoned for a far less-friendly use than retail - industrial - and the land could be used for much worse endeavors than what we now call a hardware store.

The main reasons we support this project are economic. The Home Depot hopes to provide decently paying jobs and \$2.5 million in sales tax revenue over the first five years in a city that needs both. There is no reason why Long Beach residents should travel to Signal Hill or Lakewood to patronize The Home Depot when they can, as Mayor Beverly O'Neill is fond of saying, "Shop Long Beach." (No offense intended to Signal Hill and Lakewood.)

Also, we are concerned with residents who say they want to grow Long Beach's business base but only in ways they see fit. They would rather define the economic activity they would like to see - say engineering and accounting firms - rather than let the free market work.

If the community doesn't want Home Depot, it won't shop there, but let lack of interest be the reason, not the stifling of enterprise or anti-competitive NIMBYism. We heard disapproval like this before Wal-Mart and Starbucks came to Long Beach. Both companies are here, and the sky - and property values - haven't fallen.

Residents opposed to The Home Depot project do have valid concerns about the adequacy of Loynes Drive, which is narrow, winding and built on landfill, and that issue needs to be worked out in the Planning Commission review process. The Home Depot has committed to improving roads into the center, driveways and the like, but Loynes warrants careful consideration.

Many of the complaints we've read about The Home Depot seem more based in fear than fact, particularly those who say employees toiling inside its big boxes aren't treated well.

The Home Depot is one of America's biggest and best companies with an outstanding track record of paying decent wages and health benefits, promoting and training from within, giving second chances to those with imperfect work histories, doing well by investors and donating to charity.

The company does pay lower wages for less-than-key positions, just like most employers, but everyone needs to start somewhere. They pay supervisors, managers and those with trade specialties well, considering the skill sets those jobs require, and give them (ahem) tools they can use in future jobs. Also, Long

Beach, where only a quarter of residents have finished college, offers a deep pool of blue-collar talent.

Those who say retail and restaurant jobs aren't good enough for the Eastside should consider that California's unreasonable corporate taxes and high cost of doing business are unattractive to many "desirable" employers. There's a reason companies like Boeing are slowly leaving Southern California, and it's not because they don't like sunshine. Long Beach, with its high levels of poverty, is in no position to turn its nose up at those who sign paychecks.

Another complaint we hear about is day laborers hanging around Home Depot. These guys are the unfortunate byproduct of Home Depot's success and a nation with a failed immigration policy, but they are not the retailer's fault or responsibility. That is a matter for politicians and law enforcement to handle if it arises.

We also keep hearing of traffic problems The Home Depot would bring to an already congested area. Traffic will surely increase some but much of it going to Home Depot will be staggered throughout the day. Construction workers are on an earlier schedule than most workers. Weekend traffic, which is already bad, will worsen a little, but presumably most people aren't in as much of a hurry.

We're not sure who came up with the expectation that the project site should mirror a rural area. The site is in the nation's most populous state, on the border of the state's two most populous counties and inside California's fifth-largest city. It's also at the nexus of three freeways and close to one of the West's biggest universities. There is traffic there because people live, work, dine, shop and go to school in the area - activities we wholeheartedly encourage.