

## Design Center a Win-Win for LB

By Cindy Frye

The City of Long Beach is in flux. Citywide elections are on the horizon, a handful of controversial development projects are on the drawing boards and citizens are getting an earful of promises from local politicians to international corporations about how to make their lives better.

One aspect of this interesting period for the fifth-largest city in the state is looking at the way the community's landscape is changing. With ambitious high-rise and retail developments downtown addressing housing and tourism needs, to adding thousands of square feet of space at the city's antiquated municipal airport, one of the more innocuous projects seems to be hitting the proverbial brick wall.

The Home Depot Design Center project in East Long Beach is being proposed to replace the long-abandoned "tank farm" along Studebaker Road at Loynes Drive. The private development, which would include more than 139,500 square feet of a home design and garden center, 6,000 square feet of restaurant space and 12,000 square feet of retail stores, would ultimately eliminate the blighted appearance of the 16.7 acre tank farm.

But that's not all. It would bring traffic flow improvements from 2nd Street

to the 22 Freeway, improved open-space access and additional revenue to a city where a three-year budget deficit has caused city services to be reduced.

To help demystify the project, which was initially proposed for the site two years ago, and to share information spotlighting the positive effects the development would have on the area, a grassroots group of concerned citizens have banded together to share their enthusiasm and knowledge, about the development.

As part of that effort, Beeler & Associates, the parent company of the *Beachcomber*, is spearheading a local public relations campaign to educate the citizenry and dispel any misinformation about the project.

"In our opinion, the Design Center is the best possible use for the parcel being developed," said agency owner Jay Beeler. "This is a rare opportunity to reverse the trend of sales tax dollars going to other cities and to reduce the city's dismal poverty ranking," he added.

According to an Economic Impact Report recently prepared by Lisa Grobar and Joseph Magaddino, professors of economics at CSULB, the Design Center would significantly boost the area's economy.



**STORE FRONT rendering of the Home Depot Design Center proposed for the "tank farm" at Studebaker Rd. and Loynes Dr.**

According to the report, the anticipated construction costs of the center and related establishments would be more than \$21 million. Construction activity alone would generate 221 direct and 63 indirect jobs, with 116 induced jobs, for a total regional impact of 400 jobs.

The total employment impact to the region, excluding construction, is 389 new jobs with a combined payroll of \$12.9 million and output valued at \$42.5 million, according to Grobar's and Magaddino's predictions. Historically, retail jobs tend to be filled by local workers, thus giving Long Beach residents employment opportunities they may otherwise not have.

The economics professors estimate that in the first year, the design center would generate \$50 million in sales, which in turn would generate taxable revenues of \$4.1 million, of which \$500,000 accrues to the city's general fund. Other retail businesses at the center would generate 30

jobs with taxable sales of \$3.9 million and the restaurant would generate 25 jobs and with taxable sales of \$1.1 million.

The Home Depot Design Center is intended to attract an interior design clientele, unlike the Home Depot Home Improvement stores, which cater more to "do-it-yourself" home improvement novices and the construction trade. Concerns have been raised that this type of center would attract day laborers who tend to loiter near the property. However, because the design aspect of the center is not contractor oriented, there is little demand for those workers.

Other noteworthy aspects of the project include extensive landscaping and architectural façade improvements to the overall appearance of the property, improvements to the 7th Street Park adjacent to Kettering Elementary School, and more than \$2 million in traffic improvement measures, all paid for by the developer.

A telephone survey in August 2005 asked about 500 registered voters in the area what they thought about the project. Results revealed that 71 percent support the project because it keeps sales tax dollars in the city and creates jobs; 78 percent support it because the project will clean up the existing blight; and overall, 65 percent polled citywide support the project.

From the beginning, back in March 2004, some residents living in the University Park Estates neighborhood near the site have circled the wagons to fight off the Design Center project. The issues voiced by the residents concern the quality of life of their neighborhood, increased traffic through their streets and along Studebaker Road and Loynes Drive, wetlands destruction, toxic dump leakage, noise during and after construction, and allowing another “big-box retailer” into the area.

An Environmental Impact Report was conducted for the project with public comment ending in June 2005. The report concluded that most of the residents’ concerns were

unfounded and that in fact the development would improve a number of conditions, including traffic circulation and would create a pedestrian and bicycle-friendly environment.

As for the wetlands concerns, the EIR confirmed that no wetland environment existed on the site and also pointed out that this project is one of the first to be required to meet the 30 percent open space requirement in the South East Area Development and Improvement Plan (SEADIP).

Because the site currently is zoned for industrial uses, an alternative to the Design Center project under consideration is a truck receiving terminal, which does not generate sales tax revenue for the city.

One supporter of the project, University Park Estates resident Mark Bixby, whose extended family owns a large portion of the land in SEADIP but does not have any financial interest in the project, has said, along with many of this neighbors, that he supports bringing the Home Depot Design Center to his neck of the woods. “Do you want a nice retail center . . . or do you want



**ARTIST RENDERING**, below, of what the tank farm at Studebaker Rd. and Loynes Dr. will look like at the main entrance to the Home Depot Design Center complex and the current view.

an industrial park with a lot more trucks?” Bixby questioned.

If the proposed project does come to fruition, the neighboring community would not only have access to home improvement and garden center shopping opportunities, along with retail stores and a family-oriented restaurant, but

a welcoming and enticing invitation to shop and dine – and spend revenue-generating dollars – in Long Beach.

To get a thorough glimpse of the Home Depot Design Center project, supporters and the curious alike are encouraged to log onto [www.designcenter4lb.com](http://www.designcenter4lb.com).