

Proposed Kohl's store stirs traffic, environmental worries

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Central Avenue, a main artery in south Richmond, gets so congested that traffic backs up along the corridor and freeway offramps almost every day. Add a Kohl's department store to the mix, and residents fear gridlock.

"That traffic is a disaster as it stands now," resident Nina Smith said.

But two new traffic signals would ease congestion and allow the retailer to open shop, the developer said.

The proposed 99,011-square-foot Kohl's at Central Avenue and Rydin Road near Costco has roused concerns among residents, environmental groups and dog lovers at Point Isabel Regional Shoreline. A separate 76,008-square-foot commercial pad on the corner would carry a 6,000-square-foot building for a bank and sit-down restaurant or store.

Kohl's would supply 180 jobs, said landowner Steve Oliver of Oliver & Co. Estimates of sales tax revenues from the city and the developer range from about \$300,000 to \$500,000 a year.

The Planning Commission is scheduled to weigh the project Nov. 6. The Design Review Board took public comments Oct. 22 and recommended approval.

Oliver & Co. says the project won't have the impacts that some fear. The site is not vacant but instead houses two two-story buildings totaling 168,000 square feet that provide warehouse and office space for tenants, many of which relocated within the last seven months. The two buildings would be replaced by the smaller Kohl's building, Oliver said. Green building techniques and other measures will make the project environmentally sound, he added.

Oliver is seeking a zoning change in the city general plan from light industrial to regional commercial to allow for Kohl's. Residents object to the change, saying it opens the door to a range of more intensive, permitted land uses.

City planners prepared a mitigated negative declaration, which finds a project's impacts can be reduced to a less-than-significant level. But the Richmond Annex Neighborhood Council and local groups say the document is incomplete and carries multiple errors, adding a full environmental impact report that recognizes impacts as significant and studies alternatives as a must.

Traffic backs up along Central Avenue between the Interstate 80 ramps and Pierce Street on weekday afternoons and Saturday peak periods because intersections are close together and there is no left-turn lane for drivers turning onto I-80, a traffic study found.

The Central Avenue-Rydin Road intersection already operates at an unacceptable level at peak hours on Saturdays and is "failing" by industry standards.

Traffic from Kohl's would add a net 221 car trips during evening peak hours and 212 on Saturday peak hours, the study found. That's more than what's acceptable for the Central Avenue intersection at Rydin Road as well as the one at Interstate 580 westbound. The traffic study recommends adding traffic signals at both intersections, and the developer would be responsible for installing them, city planner Hector Rojas said.

Other improvements along Central Avenue might be in store. The Contra Costa Transportation Authority initially studied major changes that proved pricey without solving the problem, said Andrea Glerum, project manager. So the agency switched gears and is exploring smaller-scale fixes such as lane changes and traffic signals that would be cheaper and effective. A feasibility study outlining these options is due out by year's end, Glerum said. Cities likely would lead the projects with Measure J transportation funding.

Traffic isn't the only concern, residents and environmental groups say. A retail store isn't compatible with neighboring Hoffman Marsh, a wetland where birds journey and nest, or the Albany Mudflats, an ecological reserve partially located in Richmond, they said. They worry that increased noise, pollution and litter will disrupt the habitats, and waste generated by a new restaurant will attract rodents and raccoons that prey on birds and their eggs.

A 2005-2006 Audubon survey counted 140 bird species in Eastshore State Park, which stretches 8 1/2 miles from Richmond to Oakland.

A city-commissioned biological resources study found that impacts on birds, fish, habitat and federally protected wetlands would be less than significant or insignificant. Critics argue that the report is flawed, in part because it relies on a July 18 site visit that makes it hard to document rare and migratory birds.

Oliver said his project won't hurt the marsh, adding, "I wouldn't be doing this project if I thought there was a hint of that."

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