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There goes the neighborhood: O'Fallon residents oppose shopping center

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The neighborhood could soon get a bank, coffee shop, pharmacy, deli and medical clinic, but the neighbors are saying if city leaders let it happen, there goes the neighborhood.

Residents gathered more than 340 signatures on a petition in an attempt to stop development of a 40,000-square-foot shopping center at Kyle and Lincoln streets in O'Fallon. Plans call for five buildings on eight acres on the northwest corner, next to the Nolan Creek Estates neighborhood.

The O'Fallon City Council will vote tonight whether to allow St. Louis developer Gerard Grewe to build the Creekside Promenade for a group called Lincoln & Kyle, LLC. Grewe could not be reached.

"We really do love living in O'Fallon and we all chose to live here for the reason that we could live in a great neighborhood area and drive five to seven minutes to get to the bank and the cleaners and the grocery store," said neighborhood resident Tom Faulkner. "Yes, we would like some retail services, but not this type of service. We don't want a retail shopping center in the heart of our neighborhood."

The city's comprehensive plan views the area as neighborhood commercial space, which would allow a maximum of 15,000 square feet on a corner. While putting 40,000 square feet on one corner may violate the plan, the city's administrator said it is acceptable in this case.

"The comprehensive plan is not a law, it's primarily a guideline of where the city anticipates or expects land use to be in certain areas," said O'Fallon City Administrator Walter Denton. "Staff said the proposal was acceptable because two of those corners at that intersection are incapable of being developed because they are part of a 90-year conservation easement. On the southwest corner the land is owned by a church and they have said they intend to build a church there."

That leaves one corner of the intersection, the northwest corner, open for retail development.

"Our thinking was that since the other three corners are not capable of being developed, then putting all 40,000 square feet on one corner, while technically may be going against the plan, is still in the spirit of the plan," Denton said. "It's just putting all the permitted floor space in one quadrant, instead of four."

The five buildings will include two strip malls and proposed businesses include a bank and ATM, a 24-hour drug store, a coffee shop, a deli and an urgent-care facility.

"Nobody is thinking that spot isn't going to be turned into something, we know it's not going to be a bean field or a corn field, but we are just asking the city to follow the plan," said Dave Crane, a resident of Nolan Creek Estates. "I don't think it's fair to put 40,000-square-feet on one corner. It just seems wrong."

Faulkner said neighbors are not anti-progress.

"We all understand there has to be progress, but, at the end of the day, we either have a comprehensive plan, or we don't," he said. "Once you pour the concrete there is no going back and we just feel this is the wrong decision for this area."

Previous votes on the proposal have been split, and the vote tonight could be so close that it will be up to Mayor Gary Graham to break a possible tie if necessary.

If the council denies the proposal, the developer has to wait a year unless he has a proposal significantly different from the current one.

City leaders could also decide to approve the plan but put restrictions on it, such as reducing the size, providing a buffer or restricting use of the 13 acres behind the proposed retail center.

Denton said he believes aldermen will have a long discussion tonight and may try to reduce the project's size.

Crane said he is planning a presentation about the project to the city council at tonight's meeting.

"Hopefully we will be able to convince them to make the right decision," Crane said. "I think the aldermen are listening, but perhaps we are not providing the right kind of information or enough information to help them make their decision. We are not anti-progress, but we want them to do what's right, do what's fair, do what's in the comprehensive plan."

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