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VIEWPOINT

Flower Hill expansion plans are bad for the community

By Robert K. Vicino

(Editor's note: Robert K. Vicino is spokesperson for Citizens Against Flower Hill's Excessive Expansion.)



Plans are wilting at Flower Hill Mall.

It may be time to score one for the little guy. Since the large development firm that owns Flower Hill Promenade signaled its plan for a massive expansion of this neighborhood shopping center three years ago, the state of California has now signaled its support for the neighborhood's concern over this aberration.

On May 30, 2007 the California Coastal Commission sent a follow-up letter to the city of San Diego advising that the commission has jurisdiction over Flower Hill Mall's recent new additions: a significant lot split, and the proposed massive expansion that would more than double the size, bulk, mass, and height of the center.

The commission asserted its claim to jurisdiction over all coastal development permits at Flower Hill, including the Paradise Grille restaurant and patio expansions, and the pending redevelopment. The city of San Diego has ignored previous notices from the commission and may continue to do so this time around.

Why would the city so adamantly want to have autonomous oversight over such a controversial project?

Just follow the money.

This outpost abutting Del Mar and Solana Beach has little physical impact on San Diego itself. But it may have tremendous financial benefit in added property, and sales tax revenues, if allowed to expand by more than 250 percent.

The development team, headed by La Jolla resident Jeffrey Essakow, is planning to expand the center from its current 108,000-square-feet to over 250,000-square-feet and has even threatened to scale it up to 450,000-square-feet (the size of a regional mall).

If expanded, this overly-commercialized project will have tremendous impact on the surrounding communities in terms of traffic snarl, noise, crime, massive sewage and water use, not to mention the air pollution from hundreds of cars traveling in and out of its multi-story parking structure.

Our group, Citizens Against Flower Hill's Excessive Expansion (<http://www.stopflowerhill.com>) has led the way, on behalf of more than 150 neighbors in Del Mar, Carmel Valley, Solana Beach, Rancho Santa Fe, and numerous other groups, to oppose this gross "super sizing" of a community retail center that is not in keeping with our coastal neighborhood.

We have repeatedly encouraged the owners to redevelop this tired center that suffers from years of deferred maintenance, citing The Del Mar Plaza as an excellent architectural example. Additionally, we have encouraged the developer to limit the expansion to a reasonable 150,000-square-feet, providing for a nearly 40 percent growth.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Essakow told our neighborhood group, "That does not work for me and my investors."

Since 2004, Flower Hill has floated a number of sketchy plans and representations, along with many verified misrepresentations, to the community. Construction was to begin in 2005, later changed to 2006, and now it's threatened for 2007, and beyond.

But, what really has the developer accomplished?

He has managed to outrage most of the community with his most recently revealed plan to build a six-story parking/office complex, adjacent to the freeway, along with a six-plex theater, and a significant number of new, national chain stores. A number of long-term tenants already have left while many more are very concerned that they, too, will have their rents doubled, or lose their leases to bigger "category killer" competitors.

Mr. Essakow published the results of a 2004 traffic study that admitted, "there will be cumulative significant impacts on Via De La Valle between the shopping center and El Camino Real." Essakow enthusiastically supports the widening of both roadways, which the city of San Diego Planning Department mandated as a prerequisite to "any expansion of Flower Hill."

But when San Diego Mayor Sanders commissioned The River Valley Task Force to investigate the widening through what will become one of California's most scenic, and natural, parks, this group was against it. And virtually every local environmental and community planning group supports them. They agree our precious river valley should remain a beautiful resource for the entire region to enjoy, not to be circumnavigated with a massive traffic jam to help line the pockets of a developer and his investors.

At risk here is in the investment in our homes, our lifestyles, and the country-coastal character of our community.

At everyone else's expense, San Diego could rubber stamp Flower Hill's plans to double, or even triple, the size of this boutique shopping center, pleasing what appears to be some of the developer's friends downtown. His lead government consultant, Scott Tillson, was conveniently appointed to the Carmel Valley Planning Group, which has endorsed past expansion at the mall.

Without the Coastal Commission's intervention, there is little, if any, chance the people's voice will be heard. Flower Hill has a pattern of getting caught without valid building permits, then pleading ignorance and forgiveness.

The recent Coastal Commission letter has put the city of San Diego, the developer, his investors, and lenders on notice that all of the recent mall construction is "invalid" and permits must be applied for and fully evaluated by the commission.

We welcome, and are extremely grateful for, the Coastal Commission's intervention on the jurisdiction of this controversial expansion. Without them, this neighborhood could be one step closer to an inner city, urbanized, overly-commercialized, and traffic-congested change that will negatively affect the value of our homes.

Jeffery Essakow has never disclosed his plans in an open, and comprehensive, manner. At this stage, most professional developers would have a plethora of site plans three-dimensional renderings of the center in its entirety and even a detailed scale model. Instead, bits and pieces are spoon fed to certain groups in private, telling them, or worse yet "selling them," on what they want to hear — more shops, more restaurants, more parking. All the while retailers come and go, while the over-scaled buildings and the overwhelming traffic remain forever.

We respectfully encourage every member of this community to join us in voicing opposition to any Flower Hill expansion greater than an overall 150,000-square-feet, with building heights under the customary coastal area height limit of 30 feet.

Save our neighborhood from excessive urbanization.