

The Capital

Top Stories

Opponents pack meeting to blast Waysons Corner Target plan

By E.B. FURGURSON III, Staff Writer

If the community meeting last night was any measure, the road to building a Target-anchored shopping center in Waysons Corner looks to be a bumpy one indeed.

People pulling into the parking lot at Waysons Bingo were greeted by protesters carrying signs, some sporting the well-known Target logo with a slash through it. Others were more subtle, while still delivering the same message - "What part of no sprawl don't you understand?"

Inside, about 450 people packed the bingo parlor to hear Petrie Ross Ventures explain its plan for the sleepy crossroads community in deep south county.

But before the meeting could get under way the crowd set upon the introductory speaker - Petrie lobbyist Robert DiPietro - protesting the format of the meeting, spewing displeasure at the process and the plan with a battle cry to "keep south county rural."

That tone didn't change over almost three hours as the crowd, 95 percent of them dead set against a shopping center in their midst, repeatedly interrupted, arguing points, moaning and groaning at the scant detail offered by Terry Richardson, vice president of the Annapolis-based developer.

The company intended to make a general presentation then split the crowd into smaller groups to explain finer points, but many in the crowd rejected that as a divide and conquer tactic.

Mr. Richardson's attempts to communicate were somewhat hampered by a squeaky and faltering sound system more suited to calling bingo numbers than public dialogue. But he persisted, determined to get through the presentation despite those problems and the incessant interruptions.

The project would be done in two phases, he explained.



Photo courtesy of Patuxent Riverkeeper Fred Tutman
Resident Tom Wallace was one of several who stood to ask questions or make statements at last night's meeting about the Target store and shopping center planned for his neighborhood in Waysons Corner.

First, a 128,531-square-foot Target and some 559 parking spaces on a currently-wooded 27-acre parcel. Then additional building would about double the size of the project adding shops, restaurants, a bank, and parking totaling close to 500,000-square feet when the project is finished.

The first phase plan was submitted for county approval in June. But the permitting process was put on hold until the developer held a public meeting under new county rules.

Mr. Petrie's representatives held a small meeting prior to filing the plan, but it was not adequately advertised according to the rules.

In the meantime, opposition organized in the community. An initial meeting held by the fledgling Lothian Civic Association drew some 250 people last month, and they turned out bigger numbers last night.

Chief among opponents' concerns is the traffic that will be attracted by the shopping center. A study prepared for the project predicts some 3,500 cars daily and 7,500 on weekends visiting the site.

"That is 1.7 million cars," said Tom Wallace, adding up a year's worth of traffic that would travel the road in front of his home.

He said the traffic study that has been done by the developer noting there would be no significant impact on local roads.

"But that is what the engineers say. We live here, we know. These roads have not been upgraded in 60 years."

Petrie Ross Ventures has revised the numbers down to 6,000 cars on weekends. But that still creates some 1.6 million trips annually onto the two lane Southern Maryland Boulevard, once the main thoroughfare before Route 4 was built some 30 years ago.

When Mr. Richardson repeated the conclusion that traffic would not be impacted he was met with howls and guffaws.

Petrie Ross Ventures hopes to draw many of his customers from surrounding Prince George's and Calvert counties. Some 65 percent of traffic for the center should come from commuters already travelling the Route 4 corridor. But area residents fear those shoppers will use local roads, most designated rural and scenic under recent legislation passed by the County Council.

In fact, traffic engineer Wes Guckert of The Traffic Group explained to a small group huddled around a table at the end of the meeting, that all traffic leaving the shopping

center would have to use the two-lane Southern Maryland Boulevard to get back to Route 4, north or south.

The crowd also expressed its worry that the shopping center will just be the first step in wider development in the area. When and if that were to happen many who live in the large mobile home parks in and around Waysons Corner won't have any place to go.

"Where do we go? We can't afford \$400,000 or \$500,000 homes," said Dee Bowman who lives in Waysons Trailer Court behind the bingo hall. "What's next for us? Where can we go?"

Mr. Wallace predicted the development would drive property taxes up causing people who have lived in the area for years to lose their homes.

Another simply said, "This will change our lives forever."

But Mr. Richardson laid out the bottom line in this whole story. The property has the proper zoning for the shopping center, and has been zoned commercial since 1952.

"Waysons Corner has been designated commercial," he said. "There are 30 some community businesses (here) today. It is the commercial core of south county. This is the place to do it."

He also tried to tie the project to the local South County Small Area Plan which, among other things called for local business development not, "strip malls, national franchises and up-zoning," that are "inconsistent with the rural character of south county."

Most were not convinced and howled at his suggestion the project is considered a "community center" by industry definition.

"This is not the kind of forum we get any give and take out of," Mr. Richardson said as the meeting broke up.

But he insisted the heated opposition would not deter the project.

"It's allowed under the law, permitted by zoning ... people go to Bowie or Annapolis to spend their money, they won't have to do that anymore."

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