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Council opposes fast track for Costco

Community expresses concern over environmental costs

by Amber Parcher | Staff Writer

A majority of County Council members oppose a plan to speed up the process of bringing a Costco warehouse store and gas station to the Westfield Wheaton Shopping Center by skipping the normal zoning procedure.

Councilwoman Duchy Trachtenberg (D-At-Large) of Bethesda, Councilman Phil Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg, Councilman Marc Elrich (D-At-Large) of Takoma Park, Councilwoman Nancy Navarro (D-Dist. 4) of Silver Spring and Wheaton's Dist. 5 Councilwoman Valerie Ervin of Silver Spring all say they won't support County Executive Isiah Leggett's proposal to allow gas stations in regional shopping malls.

"It's the wrong way to do it," Elrich said, echoing the concerns of his four colleagues that the zoning-text amendment would fast-track the gas station through the county government without adequate scrutiny of its effects on nearby neighborhoods.

Leggett (D) proposed the amendment in March after a majority of the Council agreed to support the subsidy to Westfield to help cover construction costs for the \$60-million, 232,000-square-foot warehouse store, which would include a gas station in the parking lot. The gas station would be several hundred yards away from the Kensington Heights community. The five council members on record as supporting the Costco subsidy are Trachtenberg, At-Large Council President Nancy Floreen of Garrett Park, Mike Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown, At-Large Councilman George Leventhal of Takoma Park and Roger Berliner (D-Dist. 1) of Potomac.

Current zoning requires gas stations to go through a rigorous special-exception process that includes public hearings before the County Council, county Planning Board and county Board of Appeals before being allowed in commercial zones such as a mall.

During the process, Costco would have to prove its gas station "will not adversely affect the health, safety, morals or general welfare of residents, visitors or workers in the area," according to an e-mail Jeff Zyontz, the council's attorney, sent to Leventhal, who is undecided whether or not he will support the amendment. The process can take years to complete.

But Leggett's faster solution would create a zoning-text amendment, which wouldn't require as many hearings nor proof the community needs the gas station. The whole process could go before the full Council as soon as Memorial Day for a vote.

The proposal to fast-track the plan has residents in the nearby community worried they'll be steamrolled by larger interests.

There's a potential for long-term damage to the adjacent Kensington Heights neighborhood, including everything from air pollution emitted by cars waiting for Costco's famously cheap gas to groundwater sullied by the oil and grease runoff from the 16 pumps, said civic association interim president Donna R. Savage.

"People just don't want to be gulping all that extra bad air," Savage said.

At the 12-pump station at the Beltsville Costco, cars constantly line up to wait, especially during rush hour and on weekends, said Mike Hall, the store's warehouse manager. The high-volume station prices its gas equal to or lower than the cheapest price in a five-mile radius and receives gas shipments from about three tankers per day, Hall said.

Last week, the opposition to the Wheaton amendment proposal gained momentum when the Montgomery County Civic Federation and the Coalition of Kensington Communities officially came out against the amendment. Lawn signs also are in the works, as is the Web site www.saveKH.org.

The community has reason to be worried, because gas stations are widely considered "hot spots" for pollution, said Diane Cameron, the conservation program director for the D.C.-area nonprofit Audubon Naturalist Society and director of several county stormwater coalitions and task forces.

Cameron said neighborhoods next to gas stations tend to have higher levels of metal in their groundwater.

Savage's civic association is concerned people such as Cameron won't get a chance to lend their expertise to the council if the gas station is approved through the expedient zoning-text amendment.

But Zyontz said that's not true: Both processes call for an environmental review at the state level, and current zoning practices don't require an extra environmental review for gas stations.

But Council members who oppose the amendment side with the community. Westfield has been in discussions with Costco since the fall and easily could have started the zoning process, Elrich said.

"They just want to run over community opposition. They want to make sure the community has no voice," Elrich said.

But county and Westfield officials maintain the subsidy and fast-tracked amendment are vital for Westfield and Wheaton's development.

The community risks losing Costco during a drawn-out special-exception review, said Steve Silverman, the director of the county's Department of Economic Development.

In addition to generating 275 jobs and 200 more temporary construction jobs, the store will round out the shopping center's anchors, Silverman said. The proposed Costco site has been vacant since 2006, costing Westfield \$40 million in lost sales, said Catharine Dickey, the mall's executive vice president for corporate communications.

Despite the promise, Silverman said Westfield decided the rate of return on Costco wasn't worth the extra \$4 million in construction costs.

But there's no question the county will make that money back in property- and income taxes and through the economic ripple effect of drawing thousands of shoppers to downtown Wheaton, he said.

"Right now, small businesses in Wheaton don't have a way to fully market what they're doing," he said.

If Costco is approved, Westfield also will invest more in the small-business community, Silverman said. For the next five years, Westfield will offer kiosk space in the mall for small businesses to market themselves (Costco shoppers will be required to enter the store through the mall). And the mall will spend \$800,000 to underwrite Wheaton's concert series and food festivals.

But small business owners are split on the pay-off Costco offers. The car-driven store doesn't necessarily entice walkers into downtown Wheaton to visit the local shops, say some store owners. And the car-centric nature of Costco, which is so close to the Wheaton Metro, also means the big-box store isn't necessarily smart growth, community members argue.

But Costco fits under the current and future sector plans, say county planners. As long as cars are the primary mode of transportation, malls like Westfield are here to stay, Silverman said.

"Westfield has a very profitable mall; they don't appear to be interested in doing anything with it," he said.

Westfield backed up that claim. Dickey declined to speculate on the mall's future but said the mall's new anchor store positions it well for future growth.

While the debate heats up this month over the zoning-text amendment, Silverman said the subsidy won't go before the council until the spring of next year, in fiscal 2012.

During the next month, the County Council and Planning Board have lined up public hearings and discussions about the zoning-text amendment that would allow gas stations in all regional malls, a key component of the proposed Costco development at Westfield Wheaton Shopping Center.

The Montgomery County Planning Board will discuss the amendment either Thursday or May 13 at the board's headquarters, 8787 Georgia Ave., Silver Spring. The time and date is to be determined. Visit www.montgomeryplanningboard.org for up-to-the-minute updates.

The board will transmit its comments to the County Council, which will have a public hearing 7:30 p.m. May 20 in the Stella B. Werner Council building's seventh floor, 100 Maryland Ave., Rockville. The public hearing was postponed this week from April 20 to May 20.