

Planning board approves Ager Rd. McD's for the second time

By WILL HAMMANN

The site plan for a McDonald's at 6585 Ager Road in Lewisdale was approved on June 12 by the Prince George's County Planning Board for the second time, despite opposition from residents.

The plan was initially passed by the planning board in January after an indefinite hold lasting over a year and several hearings. On April 14, the Prince George's County Council issued a remand, sending the plans back to the planning board yet again.

At the June 12 hearing, McDonald's attorney Edward Gibbs agreed to build benches and add "more dignified" outdoor signage in remembrance of the former Green Hill Plantation — where people were enslaved — and said he was open to collaborating with community organizations to honor the site's history.

This was an upgrade to signage inside the restaurant acknowledging the site's history that McDonald's had agreed to as a condition in previous hearings. The company had also agreed to add crosswalks and paint speed bumps in the lot, as well as hire additional security for the shopping center to stave off homeless encampments.

But opposition to the plan

from residents, especially from the advocacy group Stop McDonald's and the parent-teacher organization of César Chávez Dual Spanish Immersion School, remained fervent, despite concessions.

The proposed McDonald's would lie near the large intersection at East-West Highway and Riggs Road, within one-third of a mile from César Chávez.

Opponents of the proposal have voiced concerns about the impacts of the restaurant's drive-thru on the already problematic intersection, which "is failing walkers, bikers, transit users and even drivers," according to Takoma Park resident Jeff Cronin. "A high throughput drive-thru ... will make conditions less safe for all those parties," he said at the June 12 hearing.

Cronin was joined at the hearing by César Chávez parent Rachel Mulford who said she and other parents, who gathered over 144 signatures of teachers and staff petitioning against the proposal, are also concerned about the site's impact on the community's health.

According to Mulford, increased congestion caused by the development would not only impede transportation but also worsen air quality and thereby increase the risk of asthma, which Prince George's County



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residents suffer from at a rate higher than the national average.

The area is already designated a "food swamp," meaning unhealthy food is more available than healthy alternatives. The McDonald's would replace the existing Salvadoran restaurant La Doñita, a locally owned small business.

Businesses like La Doñita funnel resources back into the community and are community leaders, Mulford said. She added that César Chávez often partners with these businesses for charitable fundraisers, raising thousands of dollars. "Conversely, it can be very difficult to entice that kind of charitable marketing partnership from national and multinational businesses," she said.

The county council remand asked the planning board to reconsider its decision based on analyses of the site plan's traffic and health impacts, and suggested forgoing the drive-thru. The county council also asked McDonald's to search for grave sites or artifacts of slavery on the site, and to notify residents in English and Spanish about the June 12 hearing.

McDonald's hired archeologist James Gibb, who, with a team of "cadaver dogs," asserted that there were no graves on the site.

Traffic consultant Mike Lenhart said that McDonald's agreed after meetings with the Maryland State Highway Association and Maryland Department of Transportation to make the site's lot one way, and will convert the entrance and exit to a safer right-in/right-out configuration.

But planning department staff said that notifications about the June 12 hearing were not provided in Spanish, defying the remand's request.

"It was actually very difficult to participate in this process," said Mulford, who had to hire a babysitter to join the hearing. She also noted that there are many Spanish-speaking and low-income residents in the area for whom it would have been even more difficult to attend.

Planning department staff also said McDonald's health and traffic reviews were limited in scope to impacts directly on-site, despite the more compre-

hensive nature of the remand's requests.

McDonald's attorney Gibbs argued during the hearing that concerns about off-site traffic or health are not relevant to the detailed site plan's approval, and said that forgoing the drive-thru would not be an option.

"I know that we've met every criteria that is legally required," he said.

Greg Smith, who led the opposition present at the hearing, argued that the external factors could not be ignored if the county wishes to fulfill the goals laid out in its zoning ordinances.

"We know the game here," he said. "The applicant has worked hard to make the scope of issues as shallow as possible — and we've worked very hard to show why that box should be deeper and broader."

Gibbs however, remained firm. "Goals, policies, objectives — all those things are not binding for the purposes of approving the detailed site plan," he said. "The statute is what the statute is, even if concerns are laudable."

The planning board went on to approve the detailed site plan unanimously for the second time, but not before planning board chair, Peter Shapiro, clarified that the board doesn't have the legal authority to do otherwise based on the set criteria, and that he urges the county council to consider empowering the planning board to have that authority.

Planning board member Manuel Geraldo specified that other jurisdictions have the power to deny detailed site plans based on food swamp concerns, but Prince George's County does not.

"The difficulty for me is that it's clear that this development is gonna have an impact on the area," Shapiro said.

The proposal is now set to head back to the same county council that previously, and unanimously, issued the remand.

Will Hammann is an undergraduate journalism major at the University of Maryland.

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