

Big box planned across I-12 from earlier defeat Times-Picayune

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Five years after a Covington-area citizens group won a court battle to keep a huge Sam's Club store out of the Nord du Lac shopping center, the big-box retailer is heading to another shopping center just across Interstate 12.

A local developer's request this month for a landscape variance for a retail site along Stirling Boulevard provided the public's first glimpse of the plans for a new Sam's Club at River Chase, south of Covington.

Maurmont Properties LLC, which sought a variance on the buffer requirements, is seeking to build western St. Tammany Parish's first location of the national warehouse club behind the shopping strip anchored by Target and Best Buy, near the intersection with East Brewster Road. The parish's first Sam's Club is located in Slidell.

The plan to build a Sam's Club near Interstate 12 and Louisiana 21 has been a long time in the making, with the big-box store initially suggested as part of the Colonial Pinnacle Nord du Lac development, north of the interstate and directly across from the current proposed site.

In 2006, residents who live near Nord du Lac successfully fought the plan, which also included building an adjacent Walmart, then again rejected the idea of such big-box retailers at the development in 2009.

Stirling Properties LLC is working on the deal to sell the site at River Chase to Wal-Mart Stores Inc., which is the corporate parent of Sam's Club, with the closing scheduled in the next 30 days, said Townsend Underhill, vice president for development with Stirling Properties.

Though Underhill said Wednesday that the firm has submitted its application for a building permit at the site, parish officials said the application has not yet arrived, though it is expected at any time.

Walmart hopes to start construction of the 136,000-square foot Sam's Club immediately upon the deal's closing, with the store's opening scheduled for the fall of 2012, Underhill said. He noted that the company has agreed to a significant upgrade to its building design, with a substantial investment in its exterior appearance, including an all stone-and-brick facade and two to three times the amount of landscaping than what the parish requires.

But it did need the variance to move forward with the project. Maurmont Properties, owned by Jimmy Maurin, asked the parish's Board of Adjustments to allow a narrower buffer -- 5 feet versus 10 -- for a distance of about 300 feet along an existing driveway "related to the future location of a Sam's outlet," according to the staff analysis report on the matter provided to the board at its July 5 meeting.

The board approved the variance, though the developer in exchange must meet new landscaping requirements, such as placing some of the required trees elsewhere on the property, fitting other trees, bushes and shrubs in the smaller buffer space, and increasing the number of plantings required within the boundaries of the property by 50 percent.

Further, the board is requiring the site's western neighbor, Candlewood Suites, to plant its own 10-foot buffer along the existing driveway once it files for a building permit, with the total buffer along the driveway then exceeding the requirements for both the buffer and plantings along that side.

The parish's landscape planner will have to review and approve the revised plan before the variance takes effect.

Underhill noted that construction of the 93-room Candlewood Suites is scheduled to start in the next 60 days, pending final financing approval. In addition, construction has begun at Brewster Commons at River Chase, the 240-unit apartment complex along East Brewster Road, he said.

A 5,500-square foot Fidelity Homestead Savings Bank also is planned for the northeast corner of Stirling Boulevard and East Brewster.

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