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## Neighbors alarmed by apartment, retail plans

Council gets an earful about Covington area rezoning requests

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Residents who live near Interstate 12 and Louisiana 21 near Covington are worried that two proposed changes to the new zoning map for southwestern St. Tammany Parish would allow big-box retail stores they successfully fought to keep from their neighborhood three years ago and would bring more than 200 new apartments to the area.

Developer Bruce Wainer has asked the Parish Council to rezone 33 acres he owns between the Colonial Pinnacle site along I-12 and the Tchefuncte River from residential to highway commercial. The HC-3 zoning would allow structures, such as a Wal-Mart, as large as 200,000 square feet.

Then, across I-12 from Wainer's property, developer Jimmy Maurin wants to build 240 apartments behind the Stirling Center, a project that would require a zoning change from commercial to multifamily. Maurin already had permission to build 196 apartments in the commercial zone, having secured a conditional use permit from the parish, but now he wants to build more units, which requires a zoning change.

The Parish Council addressed the two requests Wednesday night when it met to review its agenda for next Thursday's regular monthly meeting.

The agenda contains an ordinance to rezone the parish's southwestern section as part of the comprehensive rezoning process, and the two requests will be considered as part of that ordinance. However, council members agreed Wednesday to table a vote on the ordinance until the Sept. 3 meeting, while it considers these and other requests that could alter the new zoning map.

Residents took the opportunity Wednesday to voice their opposition to both requests.

Sandra Slifer, who represents the Flower Estates Civic Association, said she and fellow residents are worried that new big-box development near their homes will have a negative impact on their subdivision and disrupt the area's natural beauty. Further, they don't see a need for more intense commercial development where so much already exists.

The Gulf Restoration Network and the Lake Pontchartrain Basin Foundation also oppose the zoning change to allow big boxes, saying in separate letters to Councilman Marty Dean that the site contains vital wetlands and noting that the project site is adjacent to the Tchefuncte, which the state has designated as a scenic river.

Wainer said the HC-3 zoning makes sense because the adjacent land is zoned HC-3, and the property is along I-12 and adjacent to the soon-to-be-opened interchange at Pinnacle Parkway and East Brewster Road. Colonial Properties Trust is building a large retail development -- called Nord du Lac -- along I-12 to the west, though work on the project has slowed with the economic downturn.

Wainer said the current residential designation worked well when the neighboring land was an interstate rest stop. Now that the rest stop has become an interchange, he said he doesn't believe anyone would want to live next door.

The residents gave Dean an earful at the meeting, criticizing him for even considering Wainer's request.

Dean defended the decision, saying Wainer has a right to a public hearing, just like anyone else who requests a zoning change. And he denied trying to float the request behind closed doors, as suggested by some.

He went further Thursday, saying in an e-mail that he would not support big boxes on the site and noted his efforts to fight the plans to place a Wal-Mart and Sam's Club on the Colonial Pinnacle site three years ago.

Rick Wilke, representing Tchefuncta Club Estates, opposed both the Wainer and Maurin requests, though he focused on the plan to build 240 new apartments behind Target near East Brewster Road.

The residents had not objected when Maurin presented a plan to build 196 units on the site, knowing that the conditional use permit he had secured to build apartments in a commercial zone would ensure that he kept to a plan upon which everyone could agree. But a change to multifamily would allow more density than the neighbors can stomach, Wilke said.

The neighbors wouldn't mind a change to the multifamily designation as long as the parish places a deed restriction on the property that limits the project to 196 units, he said.

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