

Walgreens eases neighbors' fears Times-Picayune

12/24/2011

When word got around in February that Walgreens might be moving into the American Legion Hall on Magazine Street, nearby residents and businesses went on the defensive, posting boycott fliers in shop windows and launching an email campaign aimed at the company's president.

But 10 months later, as crews begin working on the building near the corner of Jefferson Avenue, most say their fears have been assuaged.

Chief among the concerns was the exterior appearance of the store, situated in the heart of Uptown on one of the city's most unique commercial drags.

Residents questioned the contemporary facade the company originally proposed. They also worried about the effect a national retailer would have on the eclectic mix of locally owned businesses on the street, said Sara Meadows Tolleson, president of the Audubon Riverside Neighborhood Association.

City officials, also concerned about preserving Magazine Street's character, got involved in design discussions early, said William Gilchrist, the city's director for place-based planning.

Several factors were discussed, including materials, detailing, scale and the ratio of solid walls to windows, he said. Walgreens finally agreed to construct a 30-foot-high brick façade with seven arched openings accented with concrete banding. Large glass windows and doors will be housed in the openings. A metal canopy will hang over the entry doors.

Architect John Williams said the interior also will look quite different from a traditional Walgreens store.

"We're keeping the terrazzo floors and the American Legion emblems imbedded in them," Williams said. "You will be able to look up from the floor all the way to the underside of the roof at the metal truss system that serves as the structural underpinnings of the building."

With design issues put to bed, construction drawings complete and permitting for the renovation in process, neighbors are continuing to meet with developer **Stirling Properties** about other aspects of the store, including parking, lighting, trash collection, deliveries and the store's retail mix.

Construction on the 10,000-square-foot store should be in full swing in February, with a target opening date in July. The project is expected to cost almost \$7 million.

"The neighborhood asked that Walgreens consider selling local products and now they are planning to have several designated areas for locally made food, beverages and candy," said **Peter Aamodt**, Stirling's vice president of development. "This store is not going to be like any other Walgreens in the city."

Neighbors remain concerned about the flow of traffic to the drive-through window in the rear and whether a long line at the window will result in the sidewalk or street being blocked, Tolleson said. They also want to know whether there are enough spots in the parking lot to accommodate customers and employees, and, as the congested neighborhood would hope, customers of nearby businesses.

Aamodt said it's too soon to make a commitment to dedicate a portion of the lot to patrons of other businesses. But Stirling will continue to work with the neighborhood to iron out the remaining issues, he said.

"We'll need to have the store open a while and see how the parking works out," Aamodt said.

"Hours will be 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., so there are few hours during the day that the lot won't need to be accessible to Walgreens customers. It's very challenging to find a solution in a densely packed commercial environment like this one."