

Highway 68 shopping center receives approval

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The commercial and residential future of the NC Highway 68 corridor near the new GTCC aviation campus took shape on Sept. 10 when the Guilford Planning Board unanimously approved a request by a group of anonymous investors. The decision rezones 51 acres from allow a shopping center and housing development to be built on what is presently a combination of woodland and pasture.

The request was opposed by about a dozen neighboring residents who lamented that the rural character of their community would be lost, and that they were being out-manuevered by powerful developers with the deep pockets to secure expensive legal help. "This feels a lot like land speculation," said Mary Fabrizio, an opponent from nearby Colfax. "It stinks because two of the investors are sitting on the Greensboro City Council."

At-large Councilman Robbie Perkins and District 3 Councilman Zack Matheny have abstained from a city council vote on the project because of conflicts of interest.

Derek Allen, the lawyer with Brooks Pierce law firm who argued the case before the planning board, said that the two councilmen "had interest in groups that had interest in that property."

The limited liability company interested in developing the property, which is currently owned by WA Kennedy Jr., was organized in June by Jennifer C. Noble, a lawyer with Brooks Pierce. The company's registered agent is Stanhope Johnson, a partner with NAI Piedmont Triad, a commercial real estate company headed by Perkins.

The landscape of the Highway 68 corridor between Piedmont Triad International Airport to the south and the town of Oak Ridge to the north is being transformed by two related developments.

One is the new Interstate 73, which is eventually expected to shoulder northbound freight from the new FedEx sorting hub when it opens next year. The other is GTCC, an increasingly important player in the county's job training and economic development matrix. The community college is expected to open a new aviation campus on NC Highway 68 by 2010. The planned campus is located on the north side of Leabourne Road, a gently curving two-lane thoroughfare leading towards a therapeutic horse riding center and a cluster of sparsely populated residential neighborhoods.

The future campus and shopping center lie northwest of the future interstate, which will cut a diagonal path from Highway 68 northeast to US Highway 220, connecting Greensboro to Roanoke, Va. to the north and Asheboro to the south, and ultimately stringing together Detroit and Myrtle Beach, SC. A southbound exit ramp from the future interstate sketched onto a preliminary plan released by the NC Department of Transportation in early August lands right on the proposed shopping center's doorstep.

"The biggest driver is the alignment of the road," Allen said. "The exit ramp could be anywhere from Leabourne to twelve hundred feet south." He added that changing the zoning "helps with the NC DOT because you don't want them to change their plans."

Property owner Johnny O. Pitts withdrew a request to rezone 66 acres near the Leabourne Road development from agricultural to mixed-use commercial, office and residential. The decision came after NC Department of Transportation disclosed that a new alignment of the planned interstate had the roadway passing over the property, Deputy Planning Director Les Eger said.

Allen said the investor group has no specific stores or architectural configuration in mind for the property at this time, noting that "there are no footprints, just pods." One of the sections covering 24 acres would contain a shopping center; a second 27-acre plot would contain up to 482 acres of housing with the stipulation that buildings reach no higher than three stories. The developers agreed to a handful of conditions: prohibitions against sexually-oriented businesses, nightclubs and freestanding bars, and a restriction to keep drive-thru businesses with loudspeakers from creeping more than 250 feet west of a proposed service road alongside Highway 68.

Allen went before the Greensboro City Council in June and won an amendment to the city's generalized future land use map to change the property's classification from corporate business park to mixed-use commercial land use. He argued that the city council's decision amounted to "downzoning" the property to a less intensive use. The alternative, he said, would be even more disruptive to residents. "I-73 is all about getting the FedEx traffic to go north," he said. "You're talking about distribution, logistics and warehousing." Larry Proctor, chairman of the planning board and a Republican candidate for one of the Guilford County Commission's two at-large seats, said he sympathized with the residents' apprehensions about change.

"I think your fears are valid," he said. "There is a good buffer, and I think it's the least of all evils."

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