

Palmetto church no fan of store's building plans

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PALMETTO — More than 100 church-goers and neighbors packed the City Council chambers Monday night, not to condemn the devil but to criticize a developer's plans to build a convenience store and storage yard next to Holy Cross Catholic Church.

Their prayers went unanswered as the council, in a series of split votes, annexed the site at the northwest corner of U.S. 41 Business and 26th Street West, rezoned it and amended the city's land-use plan to allow the proposed development. Vice Mayor Tamara Cornwell and Councilwoman Mary Lancaster dissented each time.

The property's owner, Norman W. Bond, plans to build a storage facility for boats and recreational vehicles on part of the 4.9-acre site. He also plans to later build a convenience store with gasoline pumps.

But church members and residents of the nearby Leisure Lake

Mobile Home Park said the proposed convenience store would be incompatible with their neighborhood. It would cause traffic congestion, attract drunken loiterers and be a nuisance, they said.

"We are not against good development," said Raymond Haddad, director of the Diocese of Venice's building commission. "We're just concerned about what's going to go in there. A convenience store is not appropriate."

Opponents and some council members also expressed worries that the proposed project could create a traffic hazard. Some vehicles entering and leaving the site would have to cross in front of southbound U.S. 41 Business traffic at the foot of a curve.

There is a flashing yellow caution light at the highway's intersection with 26th Street West. The Florida Department of Transportation will have to approve any entrance to the project and make

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improvements to U.S. 41 Business, said Todd Pressman, a Clearwater public relations consultant representing Bond.

Annexing the property into the city is better for the church and neighbors because the county allows Sunday alcohol sales but the city prohibits it, Pressman said. Also, Bond could immediately build a convenience store on the site without public review under the county's zoning, Pressman said.

"A negative vote will bring what you and the citizens of Palmetto do not want," he said.

Having that control, as well as adding to the city's tax base, swayed the council members who approved the project.

"I want the city to have control

over this property because I do not want the county to allow alcohol sales near your church on Sundays," Councilwoman Shifley Groover Bryant told the standing-room-only audience.

Cornwell said she was bothered by the potential traffic hazard. Lancaster cited the controversial Groover's Super Market for her opposition.

"I'm opposed to a convenience store because I've seen what it can do to a community, no matter how many promises are made," she said.

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