

Big box fight revs up...

Home Depot site plan submitted

By JANE MCCLURE

Months of speculation about Home Depot's future in the Midway have come to the end, but the fight over big box retail and transit-oriented development will be revving up. The nation's second-largest home improvement retailer filed a site plan to build its first St. Paul store, on a 4.7-acre lot southeast of Midway Center.

City zoning staff have already decided the site plan will be the subject of a public hearing in March before the St. Paul Planning Commission. Staff review of the plans began last week, with a staff meeting March 1.

The proposed store site at the northeast corner of St. Anthony Avenue and Pascal Street has been vacant for many years and used for parking. It is owned by RD Management, parent of Midway Center owner RK Midway. The site has been eyed for a number of other uses over the past 20 years, as a separate site and as part of a larger redevelopment of the former Metro Transit bus barn site to the west at Snelling and St. Anthony. The bus barn site, which RD Management would like to purchase from the Metropolitan Council, has been eyed recently as a site for a Lowe's home improvement store or a Best Buy. Officials from those companies haven't commented publicly about their plans.

Home Depot officials in Georgia didn't return calls seeking comment. Site plan documents indicate that the store will represent an investment of \$22 to \$30 million in St. Paul and have an average of \$34 million per year in sales. The store is expected to generate 180 hourly jobs with about half of the associates working full-time, as well as several salaried jobs. The average wage is expected to be \$13 per hour.

"The Home Depot urban retail development will have significant employment and economic benefits for the City of St. Paul and for the surrounding neighborhood and will enhance pedestrian access while providing a new type of retail development to the area," Home Depot officials stated in the site plan documents.

Home Depot has six stores in the east metro area. Despite more than a decade of trying, Home Depot has been unable to find a St. Paul store location. A proposal to locate a store at the southwest corner of Lexington Parkway and University Avenue stalled in 2001, in large part due to City Council concerns about the level of public financing sought.

The site plan filing comes as city task forces unveil draft plans for redevelopment in the neighborhoods along University Avenue, in anticipation of the proposed Central Corridor light rail line. It also comes less than two months after the University Avenue Central Corridor Task Force rejected the idea of an interim overlay district and moratorium on development along University Avenue at the behest of Ward One Council Member Debbie Montgomery. The overlay district and moratorium were sought by several area district councils and University UNITED, a group of dis-



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trict councils, neighborhood business groups and small businesses along University.

Proponents said the overlay district would preserve key spots for transit-oriented development. But opponents, led by the Midway Chamber of Commerce and developers, said the proposal was too restrictive and unfairly tied property owners' hands. Montgomery also said the overlay district and moratorium shouldn't be adopted until after University and downtown task forces finish their work, which isn't expected until March.

"Having the overlay district in place would have given us more leverage in commenting on the plans," said University UNITED Executive Director Brian McMahon. UNITED has the lead charge against past big box retail in the Midway, including the new Super-Target store under construction a block away at Hamline and St. Anthony avenues. The battle has pitted UNITED and area district councils against the Midway and St. Paul Chambers of Commerce.

In the site plan documents Home Depot officials quote the draft University Avenue Central Corridor Development Strategy as noting that Midway Center and adjacent Midway Marketplace area "is currently functioning as a large single purpose retail market place and every indication is that this is both valuable to the corridor and likely to continue to expand in the future." The development strategy also talks about improving the market mix of businesses and services in the retail area, improving conditions for bicyclists and pedestrians and maximizing the value of the land through more intensive use.

Tom Beach, who oversees site plans for the city, said the plans do show an effort to orient the store more toward transit and away from the traditional big box model of a store surrounded by a large parking lot. In fact the building takes up the entire site. Home Depot would have 333 parking spaces located on the roof of its one-story building. Twenty-seven street-level parking spaces would be located north and northeast of the store. The loading area is at the southwest corner of the store.

The store would be 103,021 square feet in size, with a 19,303 square foot glassed-in garden center on the building's Pascal side. The tan block building will have a tower at its northeast corner.

The property is zoned for community business use, so no zoning change is needed. Nor does the project require any variances. St. Paul Planning and Economic Development (PED) Direc-

tor Cecile Bedor said Home Depot is not asking for any public subsidies, meaning no action by the St. Paul Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) is required. One precedent for Midway home improvement retailers was set when Menard's opened at Prior and University avenues in 2005. Menard's didn't ask for any public subsidy.

Bedor said she doesn't see any problems with the site plan as proposed, noting that the parking has been placed on the roof. That gets around concerns about big box retail set in a large parking lot.

Bedor said she hopes the Menard's development will inspire other, similar types of development—not just in the Midway but throughout St. Paul. She also said the 200 jobs to be created are a plus for the city.

Although Bedor said the Home Depot site is appropriate for a freeway frontage location, City Council members have to more circumspect in their comments as they walk a fine line with the Home Depot plans. A Planning Commission decision on the site plan could be appealed to the City Council, which means council members can't

take a position on the site plan itself. Montgomery has long been a proponent of Home Depot in some location the Midway, citing its potential for job creation. "Residents of my ward need jobs and this would provide good-paying jobs," she said.

But Ward Four Council Member Jay Benanav, who represents neighborhoods north and west of the site, said the concerns about traffic and design need to be weighed carefully before any decisions are made. As of last week he hadn't had a chance to review the site plan.

Snelling-Hamline Community Council (SHCC), which has opposed additional big box development in its neighborhood, is organizing meetings with councils from Merriam Park and Lexington-Hamline to review the Home Depot site plans and decide next steps. SHCC Community Organizer Patrick Smith said the council is concerned about what the development could mean for the neighborhood. "We need to get everyone together to discuss this." He said neighborhood meetings are likely prior to any Planning Commission hearing.

Issues SHCC will be raising include that of site access and traf-

fic. When and if the north end of Ayd Mill Road is connected to the Interstate 94 frontage roads, plans call for removal of the Pascal Bridge. Smith and others note the bridge serves as an outlet for neighborhood residents who tire of busy Snelling and Hamline avenues. Closing the bridge, in combination with traffic to and from Home Depot and possibly a Best Buy, has raised fears of even more congestion on the other north-south streets.


Home Depot has already submitted a 24-page traffic study of the Pascal-St. Anthony site, which indicates that building Home Depot and retail to the west would increase daily trips here by 11,804. Home Depot's study indicates that no signalized intersections would have to be added in the area, where Home Depot and traffic from Midway Marketplace would flow.

McMahon said that while the Home Depot design this time around is an improvement over what was proposed earlier, he still has reservations about whether it fits into the transit-oriented vision of University Avenue redevelopment.

City staff from several departments will meet to review the site plans February 28, said Beach. Traffic and access will be major issues and the Public Works review of the site plan is already underway. Although proponents cite the property's visibility and access to and from Interstate 94, Beach said that does bring Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) into the picture. MnDOT will want to restrict the number of curb cuts along St. Anthony, for Home Depot and for any new development to the west.

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