

Editorial: Midway SuperTarget makes bow to urbanity

Tonight, the St. Paul City Council is expected to give a green light to constructing the Midway SuperTarget. That will disappoint community groups that want a higher density, less "big box," more transit-friendly development.

They're right, although the negotiated deal is probably the best to hope for at this point -- especially since the project was given preliminary approval before the city got serious about a design vision for the Central Corridor.

Count us among those who'd like to see a more creative, urban village-type building. Target has built more than two dozen multilevel stores in recent years -- including a highly successful one in downtown Minneapolis. As the chain's first urban SuperTarget, this store offered an opportunity for the company to once again prove itself a design pioneer. Perhaps if St. Paul hadn't been asleep at the design switch that would have happened.

Still it is encouraging that Target has agreed to some modifications. The company will break up parking with greenery and walkways. The design includes a landscaped, covered sidewalk to the street and a bus shelter. The building will also have display windows for a more attractive streetscape.

Those are small changes, and if there are others Target can make without setting the project back, it should. But these are steps in the right direction as that part of the Central Corridor looks ahead to more development.

In the future, there will be opportunities to do more on the Target site to address transit, community, density and economic development issues. The new store and parking lot will be constructed farther south on the site, freeing up some of the space closer to University Avenue. Target officials are open to selling or leasing that land for projects that would bring more density, jobs, tax base and transit-friendly development to the site.

Although the store will likely be more "big box" than not, we join many in St. Paul who hope the company will remain open to modifications -- including multilevel parking and more infill -- in both the short and long term. A chance to remake an urban environment into a more attractive, people-friendly place doesn't come around very often.

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On Target: Time to sign on dotted line

The St. Paul City Council should put approval of a new Midway SuperTarget in the express lane today. After three weeks of delay, the City Council needs to wrap up its review and sign off on plans for a University Avenue megastore.

We know such action will disappoint some of the city's most engaged community activists, who have been pushing Target Corp. hard for changes they believe would be more in keeping with their "bigger picture" vision for that portion of the Central Corridor.

Nevertheless, we believe Target already has gone the extra mile in trying to work with community groups to find a compromise plan for what would become the first urban megastore among its 14 Twin Cities-area SuperTargets.

We're all in favor of community input in helping to shape development in the city. In this case, Target, as a private business seeking no public subsidy, has more than met that test.

A VARIETY OF AGENDAS

Development projects these days inevitably produce clouds of buzzwords and overlapping community agendas involving design issues, development questions and social justice concerns. As a result, the Midway SuperTarget has become Case Study No. 1 for Urban Planning 101.

For example, Brian McMahon, executive director of the University UNITED coalition, has pushed consistently for transit-oriented development along the entire avenue and has come away "quite positive" about Target's recent changes to its plan. He cites in particular improved pedestrian connections to University and transit connections to Hamline Avenue.

Other community activists aren't as pleased.

Bernie Hesse, of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 789, wants Target and future corridor investors to focus more on "the three-legged stool of jobs, community needs and good design." Jessica Treat, executive director of the Lexington-Hamline Community Council, talks of the importance of strong urban planning and the need for "high-density and transit-friendly" development. Jo Haberman of the Alliance for Metropolitan Stability, meanwhile, wants to see the Target development result in more "racial and economic equity" for neighborhood residents.

The result of entwined design and social justice issues has produced a mix of voices and views that leave a potential developer running a gantlet of competing and sometimes conflicting viewpoints.

Often drowned out in the noisy process is the voice of consumers, who vote with their wallets.

WORKING IT OUT

We believe Target has negotiated in good faith on issues where it can bend and has drawn the line on other proposals that might interfere with its economic vitality.

Company officials, for example, have agreed to bisect the parking lot with an extended tree-lined sidewalk, add a plaza and bus stop along Hamline Avenue and sell part of the site for future development. The company, according to the proposed City Council resolution, also has agreed to hire 80 percent of its employees from the Midway area and give \$200,000 to St. Paul's Safe Cities program.

It has rejected proposals, however, that it build a multi-story SuperTarget or that it put housing atop the store.

Even with Target's latest concessions, the City Council last week put off approval for the second time, reportedly because of last-minute negotiations between Target and Council Member Debbie Montgomery,

who represents the area. The discussions apparently covered several unidentified issues, as well as the percentage of minority contractors to be used during construction.

The second delay prompted Target officials to object. "We are disappointed that at the 11th hour the City Council delayed approval," they said in a prepared statement. "In our experience, we've never been subjected to such unrelated mandates placed upon a \$30 million privately financed project."

They added: "Further delays and such mandates will jeopardize this project."

In her response, Montgomery reassured folks, saying, "I guarantee you we'll get this worked out by next week."

We hope she's right. We would hate to see Target drop its plan, although few observers consider that likely, given the store's recent economic performance and the growth expected both from the store's supersizing and the avenue's potential with the prospect of a light rail line that would connect the St. Paul and Minneapolis downtowns.

OPTIMISTIC, REALISTIC

In our view, the current model for meaningful community input needs better ground rules and some shared understandings of what's at stake for the future of St. Paul. There's much to gain from civic interest and engagement, provided it's grounded in economic reality. We would like to see:

- Realistic expectations for community involvement. Neighborhood voices need to be heard, but community groups have to recognize the legitimate distinction between having their say and having their way. This is particularly true when private investment, not public subsidy, is involved.
- Acknowledgement of the importance of business investment. Livable communities need thriving neighborhoods and thriving, competitive businesses. The city and its citizens should be encouraging, not discouraging, commercial investment and development. It's these economic engines that provide the jobs that fund stable families and healthy city budgets.
- More true win-win situations. Rather than confrontational "negotiations," we would like to see more real partnerships. McMahon makes the case that community representatives have a lot to offer to neighborhood business newcomers: their knowledge of the area, good will, customer potential and a friendly alliance when an enterprise encounters a problem, whether it be vandalism, loitering, crime or some other nuisance.
- More balance between short-term achievements and long-term visions. We see unnecessary risk in the push for moratoriums while neighborhoods await development of a full-blown "community consensus" or elaborate "vision statement." Valuable momentum slips away while these efforts coalesce. Furthermore, community consensus is no substitute for individual decisions to invest. And nothing is permanent anyway.
- Better city-level planning coordination. Changing administrations and changing priorities — inevitable in a democracy — can be impediments in keeping a city's vision in sync. Community activists routinely complain about conflicts among the city's comprehensive plan, small area plans and zoning designations.

There's more than enough blame to go around, but we like what McMahon told us: "This is what happens in the absence of planning, development framework, clear process and, to some extent, leadership. Target is just the most recent of a half-dozen flaps like it. The city has to change the way it does business (so) ... we wouldn't be negotiating a development agreement in the middle of a council meeting."