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New southside Savannah grocery store gets OK

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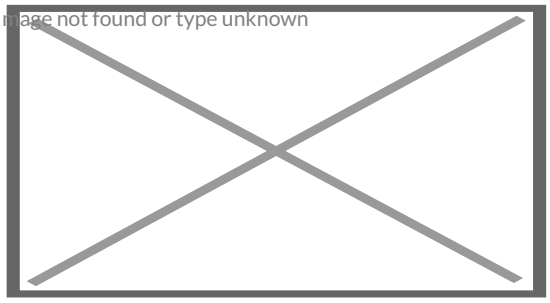

A southside neighborhood got one step closer to finalizing a deal with a large grocery chain on Tuesday after the Metropolitan Planning Commission recommended approval of the site's redevelopment.

The MPC's board voted 11-0 to amend the zoning and master plan of property to allow for a fueling station and grocery store just off the intersection of Abercorn Street and Wilshire Boulevard.

For nearly 13 years, the property owners of that neighborhood had been shopping their property as one parcel for a commercial developer. Despite offers from Publix, Kohl's and a few other major retailers, deal after deal fell through over the years.

Polestar Development LLC is the firm developing the site. Rob Brannen, an attorney representing the firm and the homeowners, did not specify the grocery chain on Tuesday but said they had developed more than 350 of these “neighborhood” supermarkets.

Polestar, based in Tennessee, has ties to Wal-Mart Neighborhood Markets, a smaller footprint grocery concept from the world's largest retailer.

Plans for the store include a 41,000-square-foot building with drive-thru pharmacy and 160 parking spaces. The ordinance required 200 parking spaces, but Polestar was granted a variance of 40 spaces.

“This is a very unusual and sad situation,” Brannen said about the length of time it has taken to get the site sold.

Of the 31 properties that make up the 10.3 acres, he said, 30 are under contract. Of those 30, only 10 are still owner-occupied while 20 are being rented. He said many homeowners had given up and sold to investors who are now renting the properties on a month-to-month basis.

“We didn't want to come up with a land plan that couldn't be developed,” said Brannen. “We've worked very hard with staff to come up with a plan that really works with just a few variances.”

The commission spent nearly two hours peppering the planning commission staff and petitioner with questions about the plan, namely parking issues, signage and traffic. As one of several conditions, Polestar will be required to get approval from the city's traffic engineer to proceed with the site's development.

Two people spoke during public comment, both generally in favor.

Jerry Konter, owner of a multi-family complex adjacent to the property, said he supported the plan despite some concerns about “light blight” from the gas station. He also supported a parking variance.

“I don't believe I've been to a grocery store at any time over the last two decades where the parking lot was full,” he said. “Our parking requirements are somewhat antiquated.”

Polestar next will go before the City Council for final approval.

Attorneys

- Rob Brannen