

Businesses complain about 56th Street changes

By Debbie Carson, Staff Writer

With plans in the works to redevelop the aging shopping center on the southeast corner of N. 56th Street and Bullard Parkway, business owners and managers across the street are bracing for the inevitable impacts.

Three business owners and managers told the council that new medians would hurt their businesses on the west (southbound) side of 56th and that they suspected the city was helping businesses at the unbuilt downtown site across the street.

As part of the downtown redevelopment project, the city must come up with a plan that addresses safety along N. 56th Street, south of Busch Boulevard/Bullard Parkway.

One city council member thinks he might have the solution but he doubts the city would act on it.

"I have the answer that will make everyone happy. Unfortunately we probably won't do it," said Councilman Frank Chillura.

He recommended that the city take 10 feet of land from the west side of N. 56th Street – along the downtown project's frontage – and dedicate that to widening 56th so that adequate turn lanes could be installed.

Another solution: cross-access agreements between businesses and shopping centers that allow vehicles to go to neighboring businesses.

Community Services Director Ralph Bosek cautioned the council that increasing the width of 56th Street would affect drainage in the area and could increase the city's costs for the redevelopment project.

City Engineer Joe Motta said that he would look into the suggestion and run it past the Florida Department of Transportation. They mandated the city come up with a plan to make 56th Street safer once the downtown redevelopment project becomes reality.

The project is expected to change traffic patterns in the area with new access points onto N. 56th Street. Those new access points do not mesh well the existing ones on the west side of the road, which serve the shopping centers with dozens of businesses.

To address the safety on N. 56th Street, the city must lengthen the northbound left turn lanes from 56th Street westward onto Busch.

The longer turn lanes mean that the current access points to the Landmark shopping center would have to be moved farther south.

Sin Yo, owner of the shopping center, said that the 15 businesses in his center would suffer if their access on N. 56th Street were changed. He noted that 50 percent of the traffic into the center comes from northbound 56th Street.

"We're talking about their livelihood here," Yo told the city council at the Dec. 4 meeting.

He argued that all the proposed changes to the 56th Street median are to help the new downtown center – not the businesses that have been in the area.

Rick Mott, owner of the Olin Mott store in the area, told the council that he, too, is concerned with safety, but that there has to be a way to balance safety with the area businesses.

"The thing about business is location, location, location," he said.

Khalid Khan, a representative for the owners of the Subway restaurant on N. 56th Street, said that another proposed median change would completely bar access to the restaurant from northbound traffic.

He said that Subway is an impulse business – people don't typically seek it out. As the plans currently sit, northbound drivers would have to travel up to Busch/Bullard and make a U-turn to head south to get to the restaurant.

"People aren't going to make that U-turn and come back," Khan said.

Khan also argued that the changes were solely to the benefit of the downtown district and would hurt the existing businesses.

"We are the business district of downtown," Khan said of the shopping centers on the west side of 56th Street.

The modified median Khan referred to would direct northbound traffic to turn into the shopping center to the south, where Dr. Michael Stangherlin has his chiropractic office and Business Ink is located.

City engineers are working on agreements from the various shopping center and business owners to allow cross-access through the parking lots. The cross-access agreements would allow northbound drivers to turn into the plaza and continue heading north to get to the target business.

"All of this doesn't make sense without those cross-access agreements," said Councilman Mark Knapp. "We all have to work together."

Knapp added that while the city is trying to balance the needs and wishes of the existing businesses along with what the downtown project requires, the city must also keep an eye on the greater good.

"How do we make it better and safer for everyone?" he asked.

The council did not vote on the report from Motta, but did ask that he continue to work with the businesses to come up with a solution they would support.