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Rheem center renovation: cosmetic changes could go a long way

By Sophie Braccini



The proposed plaza by China Moon restaurant. Graphic provided

The architects' 3-D presentation strikingly showed how resurfacing the buildings with woodlike material would unify and modernize the look of the dated center. They also presented a new feature that they think would have multiple functions in the center: tall towers interspersed along the linear mall. The towers would create rhythm, verticality, be a way to channel west and south natural light, and be an ideal place to hold seasonal banners as well as new merchant signs.

The proposal also included the development of two gathering spaces: one in front of Mountain Mike's and New Delhi Bistro, and the second one would be the redesign of the space already existing by Tangelo and Graze. The spaces would have green areas for play, and plenty of sitting. Kerner

confirmed that these spaces would be opened to everybody, patrons and passers-by.

The public in attendance shared mostly very positive comments, thanking the owner for his desire to renovate and update the center. Some asked to think about dog friendly signs and areas, others to think in term of water-smart landscaping. Parents noted that thinking about outdoor activity for young children would be a great magnet. Several residents of the new Via Moraga development across Moraga Road shared both their enthusiasm about renovation and concerns about impacts during redevelopment.

The only really dampening comment during the presentation came from one of the current tenants, Ravi Singh, owner of Rheem Valley Automotive, who said that before making cosmetic upgrades the owner should be thinking about resurfacing the pavement and parking areas and upgrading the night lighting. Singh added his concern that if the center would be disrupted during construction it might jeopardize the survival of some of the most precarious businesses.

Planning commissioner Steve Woehleke asked Kerner if he had considered redeveloping the center and creating a mixed-use area that would incorporate housing and retail. Kerner responded that the economic feasibility was not there for his company.

The members of the Planning Commission and design review board said the new proposed design did not have enough elements inspired by Moraga. This lack of connection to the community look was one of the most important comments of the two consultative bodies. The members felt that this center as proposed could be located anywhere in the country. One resident had also asked the property owner to add at least one element of Moraga's Spanish heritage, such as a fountain. The members of the committees also wondered if the contemporary look that was envisioned would not be dated rather quickly and asked the architect to work on something a bit more timeless. Some noted that the towers proposed looked like guard towers, but both bodies liked the concept, but maybe not as tall.

The study session also included the discussion of adopting an easier process for approval for the center, or even for other commercial areas in town. This aspect will be discussed further, as well as the signage at the center. A commissioner proposed that a subcommittee be formed to study the signage itself so it would not slow down the process.

The next step for the property owner is now to refine the proposal in keeping with the input that was received that evening, and submit a formal application that will

In a time where brick-and-mortar retail is hurting and traditional downtowns are suffering, Jay Kerner, owner of Moraga's Rheem Valley Shopping Center, will invest in and renovate a mall that has been left untouched for 30 years.

The plan does not call for redevelopment or additions, but a refacing of the center as well as the addition of tower structures for unification of the look and better signage. The architects who are working with Kerner also envision the creation and update of gathering areas and more landscaped spaces.

Residents packed an April 24 study session held at 335 Rheem Blvd, the town community meeting room, filling it to standing-room only. The Planning Commission and design review board sat together to publicly review the plans and allowed residents to give their first reactions.

be discussed during more public sessions.

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