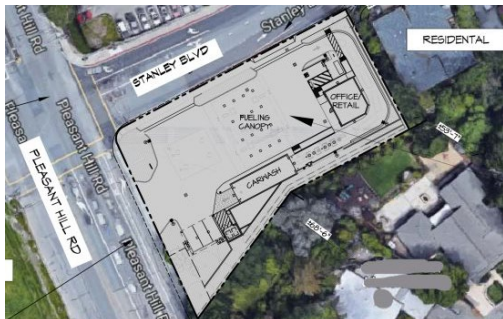


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City leaders weigh in on controversial car wash plans

By Pippa Fisher



The Don Tatzin Community Hall remained packed until after midnight Oct. 15 as residents had their say and, for the most part, vented their outrage at a proposed car wash planned for the gas station next to Acalanes High School, citing concerns regarding noise levels, safety and air quality. The council unanimously voted to bring the matter back to a special meeting on Nov. 18, giving the applicant and city staff time to address questions that arose.

The city council was considering the matter afresh on appeal by Lisa and Jon Williams, whose property is one of three sharing a boundary line with the gas station, following the August approval of the project (with some conditions, including silencers and a sound wall added for noise mitigation) by the planning commission.

Initially, city staff had recommended approval, however following public notification, public comment and

environmental review, staff reevaluated the project against the required findings, and changed its recommendation to denial.

The proposal is a request for a land use permit to demolish an existing 566-square-foot office/retail space and install a new self-service car wash and a 763-square foot office/retail space, replacing the current, smaller retail area on a commercially developed property at 3255 Stanley Blvd.

The car wash tunnel would wind around the rear of the half-acre site, alongside neighbors' borders. With two entrances off Stanley Boulevard, the most western one would be made a right turn-in and right turn-out only, giving some concerns over additional cars having to travel east into a residential area to make a U-turn.

For the immediate neighbors the concern about noise from the washers, blowers, buzzers, and cars idling just feet away from their border is only part of it. They are concerned too about pollution from idling cars, intrusive brighter lights and declining property values as a result.

Jon Williams made the point that it is not just the neighbors who will be impacted. He expressed concern about the additional traffic the car wash could bring to an already congested corridor, and for the safety of pedestrians in the area, noting that Acalanes High School students already jaywalk over to the existing retail shop to buy snacks.

Attorney David Bowie, representing the applicant/owner of the gas station Vanita Bindal, gave a 10-minute presentation during which he spoke of the need that this business fills in the area. He said the car wash is a "green" option, using filters and recycled water. He pointed to Bindal's willingness to comply with all conditions and extra mitigations aimed to address noise concerns, and said that by objective standards the noise would be well below permissible levels.

Claiming that the project is compatible with the city's general plan, Bowie pointed out to the council that it is obligated to a legal standard. "It seems to me that this is a completely lawful use, that objectively all the information indicates is entirely appropriate for this site."

Bowie pointed to the applicant's more than 35 year-history as a good citizen - a major contributor of sales tax, with no history of accidents or confrontations - and the challenges of running such a business without an additional revenue stream. He said that the project would provide a necessary service. "If you deny this particular station you may end up having no station in that location," he warned.

However, plenty of Springhill residents, already frustrated with some of the worst traffic in the city, disagreed. Many were concerned about safety for vehicular traffic and pedestrians. Several cited concerns with particulate matter from idling cars. One Martinez resident who herself lives next to a car wash, said the sound wall next to her home doesn't block anything and that the lights are "like the noontime sun."

Of the 31 speakers during public comment, five spoke in favor of the car wash, including a couple who distribute fuel to the gas station. They spoke of Bindal's well-run operation and noted the ecological value of car washes. They pointed to the already-existing, bigger impact of the idling cars dropping off students at Acalanes High School each day.

The council had concerns. Mayor Mike Anderson asked to see specific turning radius plans, as he questioned

the amount of space available. Vice Mayor Susan Candell requested an assessment of the increase of ambient lighting from current, and more information on the decibel specifications. Other questions concerned clarification on parking allowances and use, and on the hours of operation. Council Member Teresa Gerringer asked staff to look into putting in a crosswalk. Council Member Steven Bliss voiced concerns over proposed traffic circulation. The council also asked to see cross section showing elevations on the southern edge to get a better idea of impact.

Council Member Cam Burks made it apparent he was ready to vote on the issue right there and said that these questions should have been answered by the applicant and the applicant's attorney. "They should have been ready to go tonight," he said, but he deferred to the mayor saying, "I'm just expressing my displeasure in the bureaucratic process."

This matter will be continued on Nov. 18.



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