

Dealership owner unhappy with land plans

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CHICO — What began two years ago as plans to expand a car dealership has become a controversial project at odds with a neighborhood vision.

Chico Volkswagen owner Mark Abouzeid and his wife, Amy, hope to expand the dealership bordering downtown Chico onto the former Fosters Freeze property west across Broadway, using another property on the other side of Little Chico Creek for employee parking. But the plans for those 1.5 acres, which are owned by Abouzeid, don't coincide with the vision pictured for the in-progress Southwest Neighborhood Plan, which envisions a gateway to the neighborhood in that area.

While Abouzeid said he has in writing the support of more than 150 of his immediate neighbors, the Barber Neighborhood Association

part of the property to allow outdoor car sales, as well as use permits.

Adam Fedeli, a member of the Barber Neighborhood Association, said the group feels the existing zoning protects the neighborhood and fits in better with the group's concept for its neighborhood plan, which residents of the neighborhood have been working on for the past three years. He said the property is important because it transitions from downtown to the neighborhood, and the group's major concern deals with change in zoning that would jeopardize a desire for a gateway to the neighborhood.

"We've spent all this money and time and effort to create a neighborhood plan at the blessing of the city and they need to pay attention to that in their decision-making process," Fedeli said.

"I don't see any reason why the property can't be developed in a way to benefit everyone: the property owner, downtown, and the community. ... Fundamentally, development is a privilege, not a right," he added.

Abouzeid said he was shocked when he found out the neighborhood had separate plans for his property. The neighborhood plan included artist renderings of cafes on his property, and someone told him that since he owned a dealership, he could afford to build a park on the property.

Abouzeid said he and his wife Amy originally bought the former Foster Freeze property right across the street from their land in 2006. It had been on the market for a year and a fast-food restaurant with a late-night drive-through was interested in the spot. Deciding it wasn't a good spot for a drive-through to be open late at night and concerned about securing his business, Abouzeid said he decided to purchase the property instead

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is opposed to the project, which will go before the city's Planning Commission tonight.

The proposed plan would require an amendment and rezone to the city's General Plan at the northern

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and expand his business.

Before buying the property, Abouzeid said he met with city officials and planners to see if his plans would work. He said everyone was on board with the idea and he was told the approval process would take three to six months.

But after he purchased the site, Abouzeid said it was then determined his plans would need an amendment to the city's General Plan, requiring a much lengthier process. Now two years after he began the process, he said he's paying \$6,300 a month in rent for a vacant lot he can't use and is out around \$250,000.

Abouzeid said if Chico Volkswagen, which opened in 2002 from an independent car dealership run by Abouzeid, had still been a small shop, the process would have put him out of business.

"Being an independent business person, nobody could stand this type of terrorism. Terrorism is a fair word for what happens when you have to deal with the city," Abouzeid said.

The expansion plans are expected to increase dealerships auto sales from 40 to 74 vehicles a month, a hoped for increase in possible sales from \$12 million to \$20 million a year. Abouzeid said the dealership, which currently employees 33 people with a \$1.8 million per year payroll, will add another seven to 10 employees.

Plans call for the Fosters Freeze property, at 900 Broadway, to become a showcase for up to 68 cars with two shade structures designed after the ones at Chico Volkswagen with solar panels.

The property on the other side of the creek, 948 Broadway, would be used as an overflow parking lot for employee parking with 48 spots. A wrought-iron

fence would replace the current chain-link fence and the driveway would be replaced. Abouzeid said he also offered the use of the parking lot to Chico County Day School for overflow parking during events like back-to-school night.

A city staff report notes that auto sales is Chico's second largest industry for sales tax generation but that those buying automobiles outside the area is a major area of retail leakage for both the city and the county. The city's economic strategy hopes to identify opportunities to expand auto sales within the city's limits.

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