

Editorial: City must fix mistake

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The city of Chico shouldn't blame Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, the state's budget situation or the languid economy for the economic woes it faces.

The culprit is in our midst — at least concerning lackluster sales tax revenue.

After Thursday's decision against one of the most promising business expansions this year, we can only shake our heads at the Planning Commission and wonder what the commission was thinking when it turned down Chico Volkswagen's well-planned project.

Let's give credit to commissioners Susan Minasian and David Kelley for supporting the project, with Minasian calling the dealership a business that had proven to be a good neighbor.

But the rest of the Planning Commission stayed true to its anti-business form by trying to squash another good project that could improve the city's financial health. City planners — the real ones — endorsed the project.

Commissioners, appointed by the City Council, proved they don't have a clue about the current state of the city's economy and have quickly forgotten the City Council pledge to be business friendly.

Saying it was a land-use issue and nothing against the proponent, commissioners upheld the outdated General Plan element prohibiting car dealers on one side of the street but not the other.

Chico Volkswagen hoped to spruce up the Foster Freeze parcel next door on Ninth Street, as well as

an adjacent one on Broadway. After redesigning the parcels, the plan was to display used cars on one and allow employees to park on the other. There are cars parked on both lots right now.

We're guessing that the car lot prohibition was put in place decades ago to make sure that Ninth didn't turn into an auto row, but that's impossible now with all the residences dotting the corridor.

However, the Planning Commission used that to knock down a business expansion that would have added tax dollars and jobs to our wincing economy.

A longtime resident, Mark Abouzeid proved his community mindedness and business savvy by buying and tearing down the old Volpato dealership and putting up a tasteful, appealing car center that is an attractive capstone for that end of downtown.

Unfortunately, the Planning Commission doesn't want him to expand on the land he owns, which is now the domain of a defunct, graffiti-spattered hamburger stand and homeless creek dwellers.

Commissioners ignored the pages of signatures from neighbors who loved the proposed improvements. Instead, four of them sided with a handful of neighbors who instead want a cafe and park there. There's one big problem with that plan: It's not their land.

Perhaps the opponents would like to buy the property from Abouzeid and try to find their own coffee purveyor. It's pretty unlikely that one will ever settle in those surroundings. We're betting those parcels will be unchanged for decades to come, and the neighbors will be kicking themselves for killing this opportunity.

Lucky for Abouzeid — and Chico — the project has another chance at the City Council level. The

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Planning Commission's recommendation will head there for a final decision.

This project will be a litmus test of how pro-business the council really is, especially the candidates who pledged their dedication to increasing the city's tax base and providing jobs at the recent Chico Chamber of Commerce candidates forum.

Some in elected and appointed office still don't get it that the lion's share of Chico's problems are self-made.

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