



Representing More Than 2000 Families in the Blossom Valley Area Of South San Jose Since 1969

June 12, 2001

San Jose Planning Commission
c/o Jim Derryberry, Director
San Jose Department of Planning
801 N. First Street
San Jose, CA 95110

Subject: Oakridge Mall Expansion, file number **PDC 00-09-088**

Honorable Chair, Members, and Staff of the San Jose Planning Commission:

This letter comprises VEP Community Association's comments to the revised PD proposal for the Oakridge Mall expansion. It is based on discussions with Larry Green of Westfield Corporation, proposed site diagrams, and the document *Oakridge Mall Expansion Revised Second Addendum to the Environmental Impact Report, SCH #91123080*, dated June 2001.

Just as happened two years ago when the Oakridge Mall expansion last went to Planning and City Council, VEP learned of the current proposal only about a week in advance. We received the revised EIR on Saturday, June 9th, four days before the scheduled Wednesday hearing. As a result, this letter represents comments from the VEP Executive Committee, without the benefit of time to distill the information and present it to our membership and other interested parties for review before the planning hearing. Therefore, VEP respectfully requests that the Planning Commission defer its hearings for a period of at least two weeks to allow an adequate public review of this project by citizens outside of the relatively small, legally required noticing radius.

Please be aware that VEP expressed written testimony to our vital interest in this project in 1999, yet received no formal notice of this latest revised expansion plan and PD hearing process.

These are our comments on aspects of the June 2001 version of the project plans and EIR:

Freeway Access

Oakridge Mall is conveniently located in proximity to two major freeways, routes 85 and 87. Access from the freeways to the mall appears to be easy via one right turn from southbound Santa Teresa into the project with direct connection to the eastern parking garage. Returning to the freeways is more complicated, especially with most new parking now located in the front of the mall rather than the rear. VEP recommends that the parking garages be connected to allow drivers who enter the east parking garage to exit from the west parking garage to access the freeways via northbound Winfield and eastbound Thornwood.

What we don't want to see is traffic exiting from the east parking garage ramp onto Santa Teresa, then attempting to make left or U-turns at Blossom Hill Road. The distance from the proposed Santa Teresa ingress/egress to the corner of Blossom Hill Road is inadequate to safely accomplish those movements across three or four lanes of often fast-moving traffic. It would be preferable to have a traffic signal there to allow left turns for traffic wanting to return to the freeway.



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Alternatively, Westfield could dedicate a short (approximately one-block long) southbound exit lane there that would allow through traffic to safely proceed southbound on Santa Teresa or to turn right (west) onto the Blossom Hill Road. Channelizing this lane would safely prevent any but through and/or right-turn movements at the Blossom Hill Road intersection. Adding this southbound lane would result in the loss of some parking along Santa Teresa, but we feel re-striping elsewhere could restore the lost spaces.

The ideal method of access to the freeways would be a grade-separated connection from the garage's east exit ramp to northbound Santa Teresa. VEP realizes this is would be expensive. However, Westfield must be committed to doing everything it can to improve access to the freeways in the event that the mitigation measures fail to compensate for the impacts of this project.

The Oakridge Mall Expansion Transportation Impact Analysis dated 11/16/99 noted on page 20 that *"The intersection of Santa Teresa/Thornwood had some operational problems that could be corrected. First, it does not appear to be synchronized with the 87/Santa Teresa interchange. This causes queuing between Thornwood and the interchange."* If this is still the case, VEP urges the city to mitigate this situation.

Thornwood Drive

The proposed new traffic signal on Thornwood is essential for auto and pedestrian safety. Left turns out of the project are dangerous due to poor sightlines along Thornwood, and the EIR shows that LOS F would occur without this signal. Many youths currently jaywalk across Thornwood and perhaps a signal will help that. Realistically, jaywalking could increase with the employee parking lot being located at the site of the current bowling alley. With the increased traffic expected on Thornwood, this could be very dangerous.

Thornwood drive adjacent to the former Wards store is often in gridlock condition. The center island will be removed to improve queuing per the mitigation plan. VEP strongly requests that the driveway on Thornwood closest to Santa Teresa be closed. This will significantly improve Thornwood capacity by ensuring cars can freely access Santa Teresa to make right turns. Drivers often exit this driveway and block the right lane while waiting to cut into the freeway-bound left turn queue. These cars should be required to exit at the new traffic signal on Thornwood.

Cars from both directions on Thornwood currently compete for the same stretch of dual-left-turn lane roughly between the Round Table Pizza (front) driveway and the proposed new traffic signal. Eastbound Thornwood traffic flow and overall safety would be improved by having a raised median the entire distance from the proposed traffic signal to Santa Teresa. However, this would have the unfortunate impact of complicating access and egress to the Round Table complex. *[As examples of the safety hazard, study access and egress to the Round Table parking lot during a weekday evening between approximately 5:00 pm and 6:00 pm and at any time on a Saturday afternoon.]*

85 / 87 Freeway Flyover Completion

VEP is pleased that the freeway interchange at freeways 85 and 87 is on track for completion in the near future. This local improvement is correctly not listed in the EIR as a mitigating factor for access to and from the project, however it is mentioned in casual reference. This interchange completion will improve regional traffic conditions, and should improve capacity on Santa Teresa between freeway 87 and Thornwood. VEP does not expect the interchange completion to have any significant impact on weekend traffic patterns near the project, when roads such as Thornwood are most impacted by the project.



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Employee Parking / Bowling Alley

VEP is disappointed by the plan to remove the bowling alley and replace it with an equivalent square footage of retail in the mall expansion. The EIR addendum states that the former bowling alley location will be converted to employee parking to meet overall parking requirements. This parking lot is quite a long distance away from most locations in the mall, and across a major road that will become much busier and less safe as a result of this project. Even with a signalized intersection, it is unreasonable to expect that anyone will use this parking lot to access the mall except during the holidays. Presuming that employees will be reluctant to use this parking lot, VEP fears greater circulation will result in the closer parking lots, increasing pedestrian safety risks as well as car exhaust levels in the parking garages.

More than likely, the former bowling alley will become a de facto parking lot for the Athletic Club.

The local community will sorely miss the bowling alley. (We wonder whether bowling patrons have been notified about this proposed elimination of their recreation facility and whether consideration has been given to where alternative sites may be located.) If the bowling alley must go, VEP requests that the parking lot look as nice as possible and be nicely landscaped.

Winfield Boulevard, Blossom River Way, and Blossom River Drive

The proposed expansion eliminates left turns from all driveways along Winfield Boulevard except from the new signalized intersection at Blossom River Way. Many people exiting the west parking garage will need access to southbound Winfield. This was emphasized repeatedly in earlier versions of the EIR. It is important to accommodate this traffic demand without routing this traffic down Blossom River Way.

The intersection of Winfield and Blossom River Way should be configured to prevent through-traffic from the mall onto Blossom River Way. Blossom River way serves a senior apartment facility (The Atruim) and a high-density residential complex.

Blossom River Drive between Blossom River Way and Blossom Hill Road is far too narrow to handle southbound mall traffic wishing to access westbound Blossom Hill Road. Further, turning right from Blossom River Drive onto Blossom Hill Road is dangerous since westbound Blossom Hill Road drivers are traveling fast at that point and often change lanes in that area (very near the location of the recent "road rage" fatal accident).

Blossom River Way and Blossom River Drive are already used as a shortcut for southbound Winfield traffic approaching the Winfield/Blossom River Way intersection to access westbound Blossom Hill road, to avoid congestion at the intersection of Winfield and Blossom Hill. The use of this shortcut is accentuated every ten minutes when drivers see a light rail train departing southbound from the Winfield station, since they realize that the train will shortly stop traffic on Blossom Hill.

With or without the mall expansion, Blossom River Way would be much safer if the city were to restrict parking to only one side of the street; however, it still would not be appropriate for mall traffic. (*Note to the*



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city: If parking were limited on Blossom River Way, there appears to be adequate unused parking within the residential complex to handle the extra cars.)

If Winfield is re-striped between Blossom Hill and Thornwood for this project, bicycle lanes should be added to connect to the existing bicycle lanes on Winfield, south of Blossom Hill Road.

There is a mistake in the revised EIR on page 22 (Existing Roadway Network) and on Figure 7 (Project Trip Distribution), that states that Winfield Boulevard extends south of Coleman to Almaden Expressway where it becomes McAbee Road. Winfield is not currently connected with McAbee Road, so any traffic predictions assigned to use that connection should be divided among traffic predictions for westbound Coleman and westbound Blossom Hill Road, connecting to southbound Almaden Expressway.

Pedestrian Access at Blossom River Way

Pedestrian access at the intersection of Winfield and Blossom River Way is currently fairly safe. This access serves light rail patrons and residents of the nearby senior center and high-density residential complex (which is not identified on the updated EIR Figure 3, *aerial photograph with surrounding land uses*). Pedestrian access will be much more challenging when the crossing at Blossom River Way is reconfigured to a full intersection that handles most of the car traffic previously handled by 2 or 3 driveways along Winfield, plus added traffic due to the mall expansion. No matter how this driveway is configured, pedestrians will have to walk across funneled mall traffic to get from Winfield to the mall. Safe crossing is essential, and a pedestrian grade separation would be ideal.

Blossom Hill Road

The west parking garage will need convenient and adequate access to both directions on Blossom Hill Road. Signage and circulation in the garage should encourage drivers to access Blossom Hill along mall frontage rather than via Winfield, which will already be impacted.

The loss of the left and U-turn opportunity on Blossom Hill west of Hillview is disappointing for VEP members who often use that intersection to return to Winfield after visiting establishments on the south side of Blossom Hill Road across from Oakridge Mall (such as The Olive Garden restaurant). It is essential that U-turns be allowed at the reconfigured Hillview intersection.

The right turn lane extension on westbound Blossom Hill approaching Almaden Expressway will provide much-needed relief, but this intersection will continue to be Level of Service E or F. The mitigation seems to be a fair-share contribution from the project. For this free right turn access onto Almaden Expressway to be the most safe and effective, the city should consider blocking access to Union 76 gas station for cars doing U-Turns from southbound Almaden Expressway. *[One good time to assess this situation is during the weekday morning commute, such as at 7:00 am to 8:00 am.]*

Theaters and Traffic Circulation

The traffic studies do not take into account that theater traffic will tend to enter and exit in waves. The traffic generated by 20 screens of first-run movies will far surpass the traffic that was previously generated by 6 screens of second-run movies. VEP looks forward to working with Westfield to find creative solutions.



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Clearly, theater times need to be staggered as much as practical, but that probably won't be enough by itself.

While VEP realizes that Westfield will not have much control over the cinemas, VEP requests that Westfield encourage the cinemas to offer a variety of attractions, perhaps including some "art-house movies", and perhaps some second-run movies at lower prices. AMC (the previous theater tenant) offered a summer pass good for ten children's movies for \$10. This provided a very nice way for kids to spend some time out of the summer afternoon heat while their parents spent time shopping in the mall.

Chynoweth Bridge

VEP is pleased that a bridge across Chynoweth is not factored into traffic studies for the Oakridge Mall expansion. However, we realize that such a bridge could improve access to the mall. Just to re-iterate, VEP opposes the construction of a bridge connecting Chynoweth across the percolation ponds unless it is aligned more closely with Oakridge, such as at Thornwood.

Conclusion

VEP appreciates Westfield Corporation's investment in our community and promised outreach to our association. Despite late notice of this significant change in overall mall design, we feel Westfield is dealing with VEP in good faith and has expressed a willingness to incorporate reasonable suggestions into their designs during the upcoming Planned Development Permit phase.

However, VEP has serious concerns regarding traffic circulation and pedestrian safety. Clearly, access from the mall to freeways 85 and 87 will be a challenge that should demand the full attention of city planners NOW. Virtually every intersection in the mall area is now operating below city traffic LOS standards. Mitigation is urgently required—to assure the success of this project, to prevent reversal of benefits now being built as part of Measure A/B roads projects at 85/87, and to protect the quality of life in neighborhoods surrounding Oakridge Mall.

The exchange of the bowling alley for mall retail space appears to be an exercise in "fuzzy math" that reduces the ratio of convenient parking and removes a valued community asset. We see those parking spaces to be too distant from mall attractions to be of benefit—except to improve the theoretical parking-to-square foot ratio (which still falls short of city standards).

Finally, due to very late notice on this latest proposal, VEP again requests that the planning commission defer its hearings on this project for two weeks to allow the opportunity for a more thorough public review of the project by those who are outside the very small noticing radius of the project and who probably are not yet aware of the project.

Sincerely,


David Noel
President, VEPCA



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cc: San Jose City Council, c/o City Clerk: Councilmember Pat Dando; Councilmember John DiQuisto; Larry Green, Westfield Corporation; Gary Black, Hexagon Transportation Consultants, Inc.; David J. Powers & Associates, Inc.