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Public input to be sought before Anacortes rezone decision made

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ANACORTES — The Anacortes City Council wants more information and more public input before moving forward on a proposal that would allow a big-box store to set up shop.

The idea is not new to Anacortes, as the same property owners eyeing the opportunity to build a department store today were involved in similar rezoning considerations that the council previously postponed in December 2008.

The older proposal would have allowed large retail development in Commercial Marine 1 zones, replacing a 50,000-square-foot cap on any one store in that zone with a 100,000-square foot limit capping the total of all retail development in the zone. That zone is northeast of the property now in question, east of R and Q avenues between 14th and 22nd streets.

This time, Merlino Jones Brothers (MJB) Properties LLC has proposed rezoning up to 10.2 of their 81 acres of property in Anacortes to accommodate one retailer, up to 105,000 square feet.

The Anacortes Planning Commission recommended Nov. 13 that the council extend the decision to the 2016 comprehensive plan update. But on Monday, the City Council decided instead to seek more information and get the public involved.

"I don't think I've met someone in Anacortes who doesn't have an opinion on us having a Fred Meyer," Councilman Ryan Walters said.

The council instead said it will invite the property owners to present their proposal to the council at a public hearing.

The hearing will be scheduled some time in the first quarter of 2014, after Mayor Dean Maxwell and three of the council members at Monday's meeting have left office.

Councilwoman Cynthia Richardson, who will not be at the table next year, said the property in question is "in the heart of Anacortes."

She suggested the applicants make their case for the change publicly, and then the proposal could be thoroughly evaluated through the 2016 comprehensive plan update process.

"It could be a good proposal, but it hasn't been analyzed, and we don't know what it's going to do in the long-term health of our city. ... It cries out for being part of a larger community discussion," she said.

So far, community members have expressed a mix of support and concern over allowing large retailers in town, echoing points similarly listed in 2008.

An additional grocery store in town could mean lower prices and fewer trips to shop in Burlington, along with an increase in sales tax revenue. But would department stores damage the city's character and vibrant small business community?

MJB Properties proposes changing zoning on property it owns between 22nd and 28th streets, R Avenue and the Tommy Thompson Trail.

The company has owned 81 acres in Anacortes since 1990. It is a partnership between two Seattle-based companies with ties to Anacortes, Gary Merlino Construction Co. and the Jones brother's Delta Marine Industries.

The proposal would create an entirely new zoning designation for the city, called commercial 2, which would be assigned to 10.2 acres.

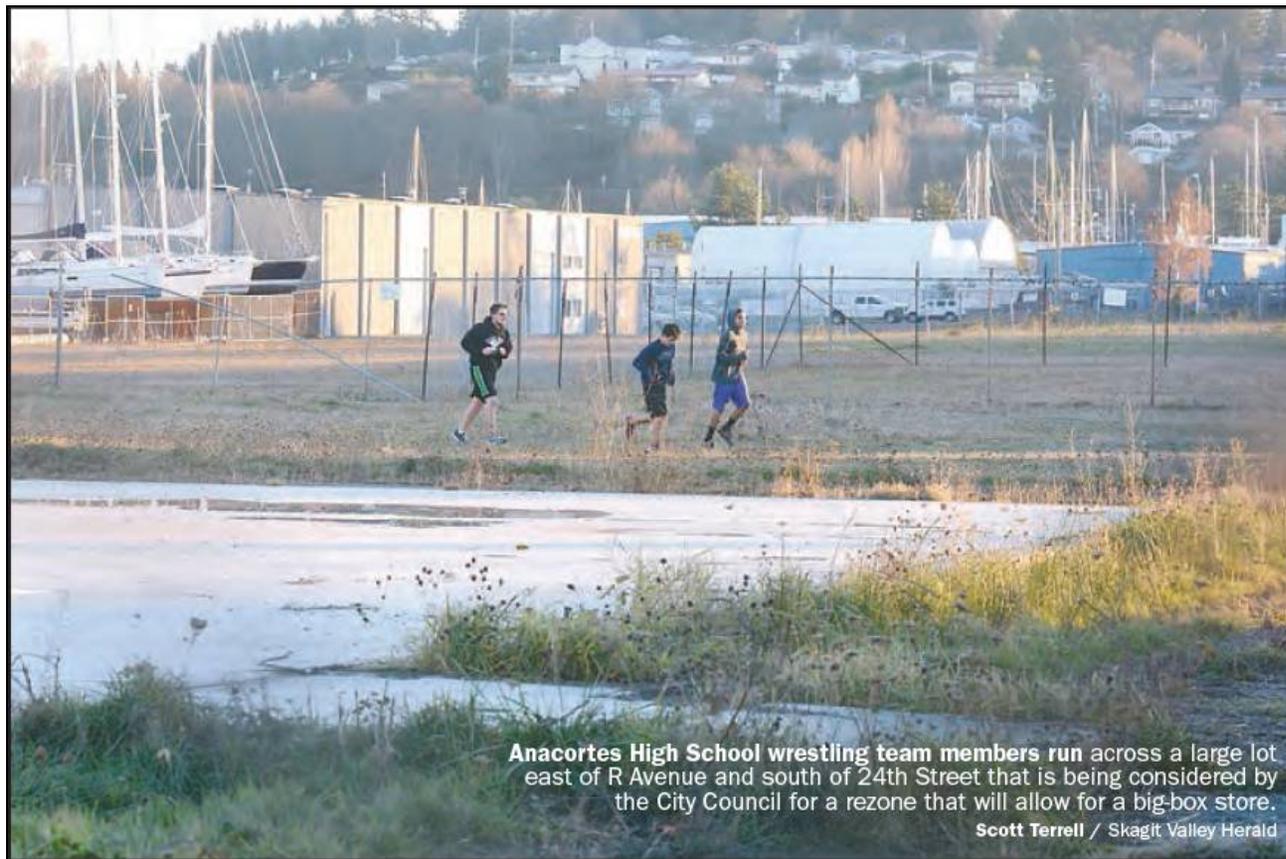
A second, modified proposal was crafted to convert 8.9 acres to the city's existing commercial zone instead, to ensure Marine Trades would be able to continue business on the property, MJB representative Jimmy Blias said.

Aside from Marine Trades, the rest of the site remains vacant. It is surrounded by other marinerelated businesses, a park and some residential zones.

Blias said a lot of thought has gone into planning an acceptable use of the property, including work with the Anacortes Futures Project over the years.

MJB does not yet have a contract with a specific retailer, but Fred Meyer, Target, Costco and Wal-Mart are potential candidates.

The new business could bring up to \$275,000 to the city in annual tax revenue, and Fred Meyer estimates it could support 200 employees, 80 percent of whom would take home wages of \$15 an hour or more, Blias said.



Anacortes High School wrestling team members run across a large lot east of R Avenue and south of 24th Street that is being considered by the City Council for a rezone that will allow for a big-box store.
Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald

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