

Sonoma City Council backs away from big-box ban

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SONOMA — The City Council backed away on Monday night from a moratorium that would have prevented a Staples office supply store from occupying a former auto dealership at the gateway to the historic town.

No vote was taken after council members Tom Rouse, Steve Barbose and Joanne Sanders expressly rejected the idea, which was triggered by an appeal from 20 small business owners protesting the prospect of competition from “big-box store conglomerates.”

Mayor Laurie Gallian and Councilman Ken Brown, who put the matter on the council agenda, said the city should consider using its zoning code to regulate large businesses in the future.

“This is a wake-up call,” Gallian said, referring to considerable public sentiment against chain store retailers in Sonoma.

But a lengthy public hearing also revealed support for Staples, including several small business owners who said they go out of town to buy office supplies.

Bonnie Krupp said she drives to the Staples in Napa and appreciates the store's “friendly atmosphere.”

“You really are losing a lot of revenue,” Krupp told the council. “Tax dollars we can really use at this point.”

Bill Willers said it was too late to stop Staples from moving into the 14,400-square-foot former home of Holder Ford on West Napa Street, located at the northwest entrance to the city.

“The horse is out of the barn on this one,” he said.

Chuck Holder said he closed the Ford dealership a year and a half ago because “frankly, the sales weren't there.”

“I thought Staples would be a good fit,” he said, noting that the store had committed to a 10-year presence and was undertaking a \$1 million interior renovation of the building.

Staples has been trying to find a location in Sonoma for more than five years, Holder said. The store will provide more than 20 jobs, he said.

Les Perry, an attorney for Staples, told the council there was no legal basis for a moratorium, which would have to be enacted by a four-fifths vote. “It's difficult to imagine this could be an urgent situation,” Perry said.

Planning Director David Goodison had advised the council that state law requires that a moratorium could be imposed only if there was an “immediate threat to the public health, safety or welfare.”

Rouse said the council should have known long ago that a large business would be the likely new occupant of the former auto dealership.

"I cannot promote a moratorium based on a knee-jerk reaction," he said.

Rouse noted that McDonald's, Taco Bell, Subway and Starbucks also are located at the same gateway to the city.

Barbose said that a survey had found that Sonomans were buying 83 percent of their office supplies outside the city.

Sanders, who owns a small business with her husband, said "it seems completely un-American that we would step in on a deal like this."

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