

County turns down Ranchos dollar store

Developer promises appeal in court

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Derrick Merchant, president of 7B Building and Development, speaks at a hearing before the Taos County Commission Monday (Dec. 10). The commission overruled the county planning commission's approval of a Family Dollar store permit application in Ranchos de Taos.

In the war over a proposed Family Dollar store in Ranchos de Taos, neighbors opposing the project came out the victors in the most recent battle.

In a marathon meeting of the Taos County Commission Monday (Dec. 10), the five elected officials unanimously voted to deny an application to build a Family Dollar store in Ranchos de Taos.

Texas-based 7B Building and Development proposed building an 8,400-square-foot the store at 1800 Paseo del Pueblo Sur, where the Taos RV Park is located. The construction firm has built more than 50 dollar stores in New Mexico and Texas.

The dollar store, which would have been the fourth within a 2.5mile stretch of Paseo del Pueblo Sur, was OKed by the county's planning commission Sept. 12.

The Ranchos de Taos Neighborhood Association appealed that ruling, resulting in Monday's hearing before the county board of commissioners. Neighbors said that traffic in the area is already bad and adding a dollar store would make a bad situation worse.

Vehicles going in and out of the nearby gas station "just have to kind of make a run for it," said Hank Saxe, a Ranchos resident and member of the neighborhood association.

A traffic study commissioned by the developer showed that a dollar store would rack up about 425 stops a day, or about 2 percent of the current volume of traffic.

While the team presenting the permit application argued the dollar store traffic would not cause a significant uptick to traffic and that the developer shouldn't be responsible for resolving a traffic problem that's the state's responsibility (Paseo del Pueblo is a state highway).

Neighbors present at Monday's meeting roundly disagreed. So did commissioners deciding the fate of the Family Dollar store.

"The additional traffic (is) just too much to ignore, and we have heard evidence and testimony from people within the community who, though they may not be engineers, are very aware of safety concerns," said commissioner Tom Blankenhorn before the vote.

"I think we should know how and when (the traffic problem) will be fixed before we add to it," he said.

The project developer was seeking a special use permit but did not request any variances to the land use regulations.

"We're wanting to do the right thing," said Derrick Merchant, president of 7B Development. "Here we are three years later, after appeal after appeal, traffic study after traffic study. We're trying...to do what has been asked of us," he said.

Merchant said his company will appeal the commission's decision in district court.

The prefabricated metal store with a stucco exterior would have been located on Paseo del Pueblo Sur just north of the intersection with State Road 518, across the street and less than half a mile away from its competitor, Dollar General.

A Family Dollar store is also in the Albertson's shopping center as well as stores of that brand in both Questa and Peñasco. In addition to the Ranchos de Taos' Dollar General, a Dollar Tree was built in the town of Taos across from Walgreens in 2015. Family Dollar stores also have opened in Angel Fire, Velarde and Española.

Most dollar stores in Taos County are owned by the same parent company. Dollar Tree bought out Family Dollar in a \$8.5 billion merger in 2015. Of the county's five dollar stores, only one is a Dollar General.

Dollar Tree “has implemented an analytically driven decision-making process to optimize Family Dollar’s real estate portfolio through renovating stores, rebannered stores under the Dollar Tree brand or closing stores,” according to the company’s recent investor report. Since 2015, the company has opened 830 new Family Dollar stores, rebranded 354 Family Dollar stores under Dollar Tree and closed nearly 200 stores.

The number of dollar stores in the United States jumped from about 20,000 to 30,000 stores since 2011, according to the Institute for Local Self Reliance, a policy advocacy group.

While several dollar store proposals have elicited the ire of neighbors in Taos County (notably in Ranchos and El Prado), no attempt has been made to limit their proliferation across the board.

In Tulsa, Oklahoma, the city government passed a “healthy neighborhood overlay,” which limits dollar stores within a 1-mile distance from each other and promotes the development of community gardens. The density restriction does not cover the whole city but is instead only applicable to a USDA-designated food desert, an area without much access to fresh food.

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