

# Critics protest plans for "mall"

By Amy Phan

For the *Northwest Asian Weekly*  
April 28, 2007

Photo by Assunta Ng



"Hey, hey! Ho, ho! Big-box retail has got to go!" local business owners, community leaders and residents chanted in unison April 21 as they criticized plans for a 10-acre retail-housing project proposed for the Goodwill area.

Banners, homemade posters and chants were heard and seen throughout the International District as 18 police motorcyclists escorted the 400-person protest that afternoon. Chinese lion dancers, accompanied by thunderous drumming, led the protesters on their march.

Traffic was shut down from the Central District to the proposed development site at Dearborn and Rainier.

The protest — a result of stalled negotiations with developer Dearborn Street LLC — began at Bailey-Gatzert Elementary and involved the support of 50-60 local businesses and organizations in Little Saigon, the larger International District and the Greater Seattle area.

The 700,000 square feet of retail, to be built on land the developer purchased from Goodwill in 2005, could include a Target and a Lowe's. A 2,300-car parking lot — two and a half times the size of Pacific Place's, some have pointed out — has also been included in the plans. Construction is slated to begin at the end of this year, but the city has not yet approved the developer's request to change the zoning from industrial to mixed-use.

Quang Nguyen, director of the Vietnamese American Economic Development Association, considered the protest's large turnout to be an indication of its success.

David West, another march organizer, agreed. "The City Council is looking for a sign of how the community feels about the project. We want to let them know that not only is there sufficient community support for the project, but there is active opposition to it," said West, executive director of Seattle Alliance for Good Jobs & Housing for Everyone.

The protest was followed by a rally at Goodwill, where speakers included former Department of Neighborhoods director Jim Diers, King County Council member Larry Gossett and longtime I.D. activist Bob Santos.

"This is not only an issue to the Vietnamese community, but Seattle as well. Ought small businesses be changed because of big-box retail?" asked Nguyen.

Developer Darrell Vange considers the project to be "urban and as unmall-like as you can get." He believes it will be a "forward-thinking design ... copied across the country once it's built."

Dearborn Street LLC and Seattle Housing Authority (SHA) announced April 11 that they would enter a partnership in which some \$20 million in federal tax credits will be used to attract investors, especially locally-, family- and minority-owned businesses that might not otherwise be able to do business in the shopping center. The developer said these

subsidies free up funding for 200 units of affordable housing.

"This rent-reduction is only eligible to local businesses; we put together this fund to make sure they still have opportunities," Vange said.

"That promise is not enough. It is a drop of water in the bucket," believes Danny Tran, owner of JTD Realty, one of the businesses critical of the plan. "The project has to be responsible and consistent with the character of small retail (in Little Saigon), ... smaller development."

Developers say they want to help mitigate the impact on surrounding small businesses by providing construction opportunities to minority workers along with employment opportunities in the stores once they're developed.

But the overtures seem to fall short of critics' expectations. Negotiations have taken place between the developer and community activists for more than a year, but recent reports say the talks have stalled.

"These jobs do not offer anything — no health care, little bit above minimum wage, no retirement (plan). We want a comprehensive plan, where it's a family wage. Even the workers who work in these jobs at Target, Lowe's ... they won't be able to afford the housing," said West. "There's no guaranteed jobs for minorities; we don't want these kinds of jobs."

Nguyen and Little Saigon merchants have asked the developer to contribute significantly to the formation of a Business Improvement Area, to which Vange has already agreed. Other demands include the creation of a Vietnamese cultural center.

Vange believes that the concerns over traffic congestion are not supported by any data in the study conducted by the City of Seattle.

"There is going to be impact from the project, but they are not as catastrophic as the community describes ... the intersection of 12th and Jackson will operate at the same level as it did before (the development)," said Vange. "The fear about traffic is not substantiated by city numbers."

"We are going to be create more lanes, turn signals, to correct the issue of congestion near the development," he added.

Some remain unconvinced.

Mai Nguyen, who lives two blocks from the proposed project and is a member of the Minority Executive Directors Coalition, worried about the idea of more cars in the already-crowded streets of Little Saigon.

"If you're going to Target or Lowe's, you are going to need your car. It doesn't make sense; you're going to need your car to bring timber and stuff," said Nguyen.