

Fast-food eatery on hold

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SOLON — Residents continue to question the wisdom of placing a McDonald's franchise at one of the city's busiest intersections.

The proposal was tabled at Monday's City Council meeting, after the Planning Commission
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Commission last week approved 18 of 21 requested variances for a new restaurant at the northeast corner of SOM Center and Aurora roads, on the site of the closed Sunoco gas station.

McDonald's is expected to appeal the three variances the Planning Commission denied, one of the reasons the proposal was delayed, along with

the fact Councilman William Russo was absent from Monday's council meeting.

But that did not prevent residents from voicing their concerns about the project.

"When we have a potential combination of one of the busiest intersections in Solon and what is probably the busiest, highest-volume commercial franchise in history, it might be cause to take a second look," Ryan Mystkowski said of some "very legitimate safety issues" he feels are being overlooked.

While she's not opposed to McDonald's, Jacki Calavitta pointed to traffic counts from the Cuyahoga County Engineer's Office that have tallied as many as 43,000 vehicles traveling through the intersection. The SOM Center-Solon Road intersection registered higher, placing No. 10 in the county's busiest intersections, with more than 60,000 vehicles a day, although those figures date back to 1994.

Looking at the number of variances sought, including the percentage of required parking spaces being voided, Calavitta contends "it's too much project for the parcel it's on."

Former Mayor Bob Paulson said variances should be considered when it's a matter of practical difficulty or hardship being imposed on the applicant.

"But in this case, Solon did not create the hardship — McDonald's did, by selecting this site," Paulson said, citing the "shortcut" potential creating increased traffic along Solon Boulevard, Glenallen Avenue and the "A-B-C" streets, as well as the inability to make left turns.

Disputing McDonald's contentions the city should not deny a "permitted use," Rick Zimmerman said just because the former gas station is already zoned commercial, the city is not obligated to put an intensive high-use business into a very sensitive area.

"There are not a lot of quick fixes once it's done," Zimmerman said. "I'd love to see McDonald's relocate (from its present franchise further west on Aurora), but I'm not certain if this should be the location."

Looking for a "common sense" approach, George Hoffman said in addition to access concerns, McDonald's has received preliminary approval from the Planning Commission for a variance of about 45 parking spaces.

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“That’s more than is going to be in the lot,” Hoffman said of the greater than 50 percent variance, adding there will be ramifications if council grants the parking space variance.

“If that happens, the integrity of our zoning ordinance is pretty much shot,” Hoffman said. “That means somebody can always say, ‘You gave it to McDonald’s, why not me?’”

Paulson pointed to “inconsistency” in the city’s dealings with different people and entities.

He cited a previous requirement for Carquest to provide six more parking spaces when it wanted to add a mezzanine for storage, and the denial of a 12-space parking variance for a Chinese carry-out — next to Solon’s existing McDonald’s.

Some residents said they were looking for more, in terms of a downtown development plan.

“If we continue to do the wrong thing with a minimal amount of land, we’re going to continue to be a ‘drive-through’ city, not a ‘destination’ city,” said Marilyn Mattia.

Dennis Tidmore liked the concept behind the Coral Co.’s Central Park development project that was discussed at length before the nation’s economy tanked.

“McDonald’s doesn’t cut it,” Tidmore told council. “Is that the best we can do?”

McDonald’s attorney Bruce Rinker said the appeals of the variances denied by the planning commission should be filed Wednesday, adding council has “a lot of homework” and needs to take an “objective, sober and long look” at the proposal.

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