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Proposed Weis store gets nod from Forks planners

Conditional use issue will next move to supervisors for consideration.

By Joe Nixon Of The Morning Call

A proposed Weis Markets grocery store in Forks got a favorable recommendation from the township Planning Commission on Thursday in a bid to win conditional use approval to build on a 9-acre site in the northern part of the township.

Township supervisors next week will consider the conditional use issue, as well as preliminary approval of the land development plans. The 69,000-square-foot Weis Market is proposed for land in a business park at the southeast corner of Sullivan Trail and Uhler Road. The commission recommended preliminary approval of the land development plans in November.

A supermarket was added last year by the township as a conditional use, under certain parameters, in the employment center zoning district. That means that although it is now allowed, it also is subject to potential additional conditions from the township that deal with subjects like traffic, safety, appearance and compatibility with the surrounding area.

Supermarket plans are on a parallel track with a challenge by a township citizens group that has charged the addition of the grocery use amounted to illegal spot zoning. That zoning challenge, brought by Residents Who Care, is due to wrap up in late February.

The project, which also will include gasoline sales in a separate area at the south end of the store parking lot, is proposed by SamCar Ltd. of Pittston, Luzerne County. The same developer had proposed a CVS drugstore on a 3-acre lot in the business park, but approached the township about a zoning change after receiving interest from supermarket chains.

The developer is working on a traffic study, and upgrades are being contemplated for the Sullivan-Uhler intersection.

Sullivan and Uhler are state roads and state Department of Transportation approval is needed for the project, said township solicitor Karl Kline.

"They're [developers] not going to get any approvals until they get their highway occupancy permit from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania," Kline said. "They are going to have to jump through those hoops."

Access to the proposed supermarket would be from Braden Boulevard, off Sullivan Trail south of Uhler Road, from a right-in-only lane off Sullivan, and from Ian Street off Uhler Road. The traffic planner for the developer has said PennDOT has rejected the idea of a traffic signal at Sullivan and Braden.

Planners were nearly unanimous in their response to standardized questions about the conditional use. Only commission Vice Chairman Dean Turner voted no on a question that asked if the use was in accordance with the township comprehensive plan and the spirit of the zoning ordinance.

Turner has previously said he did not object to a second grocery store in the township, but didn't feel it belonged in the proposed location.

The only other grocery in Forks is the Giant supermarket in the town center zoning district in the township's south end. Before the zoning amendment that allowed a grocery in the employment center district, large grocery stores were only allowed in the town center district.