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For a revival at North Hills

Redevelopment plan takes some trees but offers better prospects

By ARNOLD ARONSON

RALEIGH — The Raleigh City Council will decide today whether or not to approve the site plan for the redevelopment of the North Hills Mall area. As someone who knows the history of North Hills, and as a resident who will be affected by this project, I hope it is approved unanimously.

I moved to 4401 Rowan St. in 1965, just about the time Ed Richards was developing North Hills Mall. My property directly faces the buffer praised in an article on this page Monday. Richards sought to work with me and my neighbors to ensure that his project did not hurt homeowners adjacent to the property — just as John Kane has done concerning his project.

I was one of the people who signed the original buffer agreement between my neighborhood and Richards. This was a private agreement — not a city ordinance — that expired in 2000. At the time, we felt comfortable that with this agreement we would have an adequate buffer from the commercial activity at North Hills.

Over the years, I have lived through the changes at North Hills mall and plaza. In fact, I had a personal stake in it. For many years I operated Ronson's, a woman's clothing store in the mall. In its heyday, Ronson's employed over 100 people and was a very popular store. But as the mall deteriorated, so did my business. I eventually moved the store to another location.

And as the property deteriorated, so did the buffer. It has become a gather-

ing place for wanderers, garbage, etc., and the trees that remain do not buffer the sound and view of the commercial operations behind it. It is certainly no "mini-forest." In fact, I can clearly see the backs of commercial buildings through the buffer.

John Kane's plan to revitalize North Hills includes a revitalization of the buffer. The plans released by Kane show the planting of significant landscaping and trees along the frontage of the proposed residential development. I feel confident that the natural beauty of the area will remain preserved, for sure.

As a former business owner at North Hills, I understand the economic risk that Kane is accepting. He has worked hard to accommodate the legitimate concerns of North Hills residents while balancing the economics that will make this redevelopment effort work. For this project to be economically viable, converting the buffer is a requirement. I applaud him for developing a plan that enhances the commercial buffer in a way that is aesthetically beneficial to immediate neighbors.

The proposed revitalization of North Hills is already having an impact on my neighborhood. The plan calls for a new residential community as a buffer to this commercial activity. Realtors tell me that property values around this location are already increasing. If the project was undesirable, I don't know

why our neighborhood would be worth more.

For 37 years, I have seen North Hills mall and plaza change. It has gone from great to poor. Now there is a chance to bring it back to greatness! We are lucky to have a neighbor like Kane leading this effort with the same vision of greatness that Ed Richards brought to North Hills more than three decades ago. It is time for the City Council to be visionary as well by approving this important mixed-use development that will make all citizens proud of North Hills again.

I strongly support this North Hills project — and I live directly next to it. I hope that others who only drive past to their neighborhoods, or shop at the new Lassiter, will support it as well.

Arnold Aronson lives in North Hills.

POINT OF VIEW

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Articles should express a clear opinion on a topic of current public interest. A length of from 600 to 800 words is preferred. Authors of articles selected for publication will be notified.