

SEMCOG's role in mall impact study debated

By Gerald Frawley
staff writer

The recently released regional impact study on the proposed Auburn Mills mall in Auburn Hills may not affect the project itself, but it underscores a growing awareness of how regions can be affected by large-scale projects.

Auburn Mills, a 2-million-square-foot, \$300 million manufacturer's outlet and family entertainment center planned by Washington D.C. developer Western Development Corp., could dramatically alter the traffic patterns, environment, economy and public safety demands in the region, according to the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) impact study.

The study was undertaken by SEMCOG at the request of Lake Angelus, Rochester Hills and Southfield officials who claim the mall will impact many communities and warrants a thorough investigation on its potential regional effects. The study concludes the mall will have regional implications, affecting traffic, water quality and economic development in several communities. Although Auburn Hills has already addressed many problems associated with large-scale developments, more

thorough investigation is needed on traffic congestion created by the mall and nearby traffic generators, the automotive and truck traffic mix, infrastructure costs, the environmental impacts of lost wetlands and vacant land on wildlife and stormwater management, and impacts associated with construction.

Patience O'Conner, senior vice president of management and marketing for the firm, said Western Development will continue discussions with SEMCOG and incorporate its advice into the project. "We are sensitive to local and regional concerns and seek to develop a project beneficial to the entire community."

SEMCOG DIRECTOR of planning Edward Hustoles said the impact study may have limited influence on Auburn Mills. "Since the study is strictly advisory, there's no way to tell what will happen next," Hustoles said the study has been sent to interested parties involved in the decision-making process, including the Federal Highway Administration, the Michigan departments of transportation, natural resources and commerce, and Oakland County and local governments. Auburn Hills city manager Leonard Hendricks said while he thinks SEMCOG's study is well done, sin-

gling out Auburn Hills for scrutiny is unfair. "We have to remember we have very strong home-rule (principles) in this state," Hendricks said, adding the pressures being placed on Auburn Hills comes close to infringing on its right to home rule.

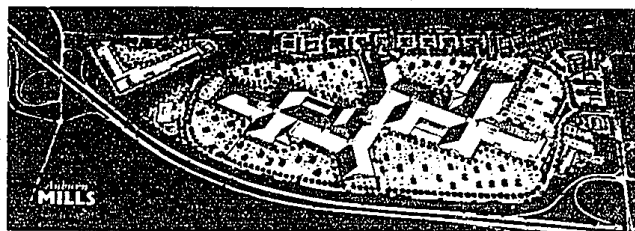
"If they're going to do regional studies for one project, they should do them for all," he said. Hendricks said he disagrees with some findings, the most obvious disagreement being the city and developer failed to account for traffic impact on I-75 and the cost of a bridge on Lake Angelus Road.

One would be hard pressed to find any place suitable for development using traffic standards used by SEMCOG, Hendricks said. As for bridge cost estimates, federal funds have already been allocated for the project.

SEMCOG's Hustoles said his agency's intention is not to infringe on Auburn Hills' rights, but to give the decision makers the facts.

"What's important here is this raises awareness of the need for a major regional growth management study," he said. "The fact that the mall came in at this time is helping to promote the (necessity)."

According to Rochester Hills city operations coordinator Jeffrey



Cohes, concerns about traffic have been answered to a degree. "These are things that should have been addressed, but weren't."

SEMCOG'S REVIEW shows several roads — Baldwin, Joslyn, Walton — are already congested. Road improvements are planned for the area, but these are meant to address existing problems, not new traffic.

Western Development's traffic study also failed to consider traffic generated by Meadowbrook and Pine Knob theaters, a proposed Oakland County Incinerator northeast of the site and traffic congestion on I-75.

SEMCOG's Hustoles said Western Development used only favorable data when it did its traffic study. "It's not a case of (Western Development's) study being wrong, but a situation where two people with good intentions examining the same thing came up with different answers."

WESTERN DEVELOPMENT used data based on their experience with their Potomac Mills Mall in Virginia. Instead of national traffic standards, he said. In Western Development's defense, Hustoles said Auburn Mills is a different type of development and national standards may not apply.

According to Southfield city manager Robert Block, the city's objection to Auburn Mills is based not on its far-reaching retailing impact — as some have suggested — but because the mall will contribute to urban sprawl.

"We don't object to the mall; we object to spending public dollars to

improve new areas when there are urbanized areas that need the money to improve what exists," Block said. "If the private sector wants to do it, God bless them, but public funds should be used with a broader outlook," Block said.

PEGGY JOHNSON, Clinton River Watershed Council executive director, said the impact study addressed many of the council's concerns. Auburn Mills would rest within the watershed.

Of prime concern, she said, is the threat to wetlands. Approximately 327 acres of wetlands exist on the site and could be destroyed or affected by the project.

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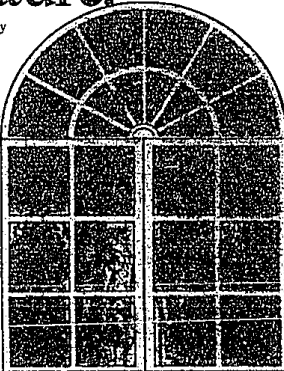
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