



SHARON LAM/EX/Staff photographer
Councilmen Jon Grant (left) and Larry Lichtman Monday listen to Beztak's proposed expansion plans for Muirwood Square.

'How many supermarkets can we support?'

Don Hillier, owner of the IGA store at 10 Mile and Orchard Lake Road in Farmington, held up a map Monday showing the number of grocery stores already built in the Farmington area.

"How many supermarkets can we support?" the Farmington Hills resident asked. "There's a lot of stores in this area."

"My mother told me a long time ago, you have to differentiate between what you want and what you really need."

Hillier referred to a proposed rezoning that would have allowed Beztak Building Co. to expand and add a grocery store at the Muirwood Square shopping center, Grand River at Drake. A public hearing on the matter was held before the Farmington Hills City Council Monday,

where it received mixed review. The council denied the rezoning request.

Hillier then displayed his payroll list, showing 35 employees from his store who are residents of Farmington or Farmington Hills. "That's a valid reason for not wanting the rezoning," he added, concerned that an expanded Muirwood center would cut further into the market share.

HILLIER'S STANCE was supported by many who spoke during the 2 1/2-hour session Monday night. But just as many disagreed.

Take Paul Terterian, who has a similar concern but supported the rezoning request. Terterian owns a jewelry store at Muirwood Square. He said all of his employees also live in Farmington or Farmington Hills.

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Council members Ben Marks and Lawrence Lichtman both supported Beztak's efforts to rezone the land from multifamily residential and parking uses to business use, and double the size of the 50,000-square-foot center and add a grocery store anchor at the corner of Drake and Grand River. Both voted against the denial Monday.

"WHAT WE have on our hands is a dying center," said Lichtman, a former planning commissioner elected to the council in November. As planning commissioner, he has considered the issue several times since last December. "My conviction has become stronger that rezoning the property would be the appropriate thing to do," he added.

Marks said although the city's

They would risk losing their jobs if his business closed, Terterian said.

"All I know is a lot of people lost their jobs and their businesses in the Muirwood Square center," he said, speaking in favor of putting an anchor grocery into the center. "Have five, have six (groceries). Competition is good. Competition makes everybody better. Competition is success."

A resident of the adjoining Muirwood Apartments wondered what would happen if the center is not expanded. "The center is dying — what are we going to do? Allow it to go into a field of weeds?" she said.

James Boedigher, part owner of Around the World Travel at Muirwood Square, spoke in favor of the proposed rezoning and expansion. "I've been willing to stay for six years," he said. "But I'm about

master land use plan calls for the property in question to be zoned for residential use, the master plan "is not cast in stone. It just tells you where to start from."

"The proponent made a tremendous mistake (when they built the center). He wants to come back in and . . . straighten it out. They're willing to put their money where their mouth is. I think . . . we have to give them that opportunity."

But the majority of council members disagreed.

OUTGOING MAYOR Terry Sever said he could not justify changing a residential parcel to commercial. "It just does not make sense," he said.

Councilman Jon Grant said he was "not convinced all alternatives have been explored" for the center. Councilwoman Nancy Bates said she

"values the master plan, and I'm not going to change my mind on this."

Several council members also addressed the issue of downtown Farmington, raised during the past year when Farmington's Downtown Development Authority and planning commissioners spoke out against the Muirwood expansion, saying it would hurt redevelopment efforts in the smaller, neighboring city.

"We must respect each other, just like we respect each other in our neighborhood," said Mayor-elect Jean Fox, adding that "downtown Farmington is my hometown." Fox also said the Muirwood Square center was originally built in 1980 as a supplemental center to the Muirwood Apartment complex to the north and west.

BOTH GRANT and councilman Aldo Vagnozzi questioned the scene of economic disaster as described by Beztak officials, who said their occupancy rates were dropping and that they were offering discount rental rates to fill buildings.

"I wonder how much of it is orchestrated," said Vagnozzi, who had spoken to some of the center's former tenants. "Several previous tenants wanted to stay and were not encouraged to stay."

Grant said the center had a "poor design" and there were "problems

with the type of landlord they (Beztak) have been. Now they're terrific — that wasn't always the case. I'm not sure it isn't a self-orchestrated hardship."

Beztak officials offered no response.

The company had proposed to tear down the 30,000-square-foot western building in the center, and build a center of about 100,000 square feet — the most recent estimate given by the developer. The \$10 million expansion would have more than doubled the size of the center and allowed a grocery store anchor, Shopping Center Market, at the center.

CURRENT MUIRWOOD merchants supported the rezoning and subsequent expansion, saying they needed an anchor and are barely surviving at the center. Many of the stores are now vacant. The current occupancy rate is 65 percent.

If the 6.3 acres had been rezoned, Beztak said it would leave the rest of the 12-acre site west of the existing center as a 10,000-square-foot recreation area for the adjacent Muirwood Apartments.

Beztak officials could not be reached following the council meeting to comment on future plans for the center.

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