

Township, Meijer work to clear the way for hyperstore

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BAINBRIDGE – After several months of on and off discussions, a proposal for a Meijer hyperstore at the former Geauga Lake Park property was back for review by township trustees on Monday.

Township officials said Meijer is ready to get started once all the agreements are in place.

Meijer has conceded on some of its prior demands and has agreed to build a road to make further development in the area accessible.

Township Zoning Inspector Karen Endres met last week with representatives of Meijer to discuss some of the issues involving the store's intent to develop a grocery store that fronts on Aurora Road property owned by Cedar Fair of Sandusky.

Trustee Lorrie Benza said a productive meeting took place last week that came after a time of limited communication when trustees in April put together a list of conditions to be met before allowing Meijer to proceed with its development plan.

"We are encouraged to see those discussions," Mrs. Benza said. "Up to now, there has not been much activity on the conditions, but now Meijer has taken some action, and we were in general agreement that discussions should continue."

Mrs. Benza noted that with an Aldi food store being planned in the neighboring Shops at Marketplace and Meijer eyeing the Geauga Lake property, there could be four major retailers and grocers within a half mile.

Walmart and Target stores have been open for years and both have grocery sections.

Meijer, featuring general groceries, clothing, electronics and other merchandise, has proposed building a 200,000 square-foot building on about 41 acres on the parking lot of the former amusement park off Aurora Road (Route 43).

The approximately 260 acres surrounding Geauga Lake in the township owned by Cedar Fair has been rezoned for mixed-use, which does not permit big-box stores. Meijer, however, would be permitted to develop under the former commercial-recreation zoning which allows big-box buildings.

At issue has been Meijer's insistence that a long list of competing uses be prohibited on the property surrounding its proposed site. The company wanted deed restrictions on the adjacent property to prevent a list of other uses that would compete with its store ranging from a pharmacy to an ice cream store. Township Trustees were skeptical about the list.

Mrs. Endres said the meeting with township consultant Jennifer Syx, of inSITE, and representatives of Cedar Fair and Meijer was productive.

The issue of Meijer's extensive list of competing interests is close to being resolved, she said.

Meijer representatives are agreeing to eliminate some of the prohibitions they had requested. As an example, specialty ethnic and health food stores would be permitted as long as they do not exceed 20,000 square feet, she said of one proposal.

One of the goals is not to preclude entertainment, including movie theaters and playhouses, she said.

She added that the township wants it stipulated that there will be no restrictions on uses in areas within 500 feet of Geauga Lake, considered a prime development area.

Ms. Syx said, "We finally feel we have reached an agreement and understanding." The next step would be approval of a lot split of the 41 acres from the larger Cedar Fair property, she said.

Meijer is proposing a store with multiple entrances including one for a future coffee shop. The plan calls for a varied roof line along with different building materials. More detailed site plans would be reviewed as the application moves forward.

The township had wanted Meijer to incorporate a design to reflect the Geauga Lake Park heritage, but Meijer representatives state they are not interested, Mrs. Endres said.

Meijer representatives have agreed to add a 4-foot-wide pedestrian sidewalk as well as 11 landscape islands with trees in the parking lot.

Ms. Syx said Meijer officials agreed to allow a public road that would provide access to not only the store but future development on the Cedar Fair property. The corporation would build the road to Geauga County specifications and then turn it over to the township. It will have a boulevard look to it, she added.

Meijer is also considering a smaller out-lot for a possible service station, which is a conditional use. The company would have to get approval from the township board of zoning appeals.

Mrs. Endres said Meijer is ready to start the project. The goal is to get a general agreement signed by all involved, including Meijer, Cedar Fair and the township. A signed document would allow a lot split and the issuing of a zoning permit once a complete application is submitted.