



Rockridge

RCPC ROCKRIDGE COMMUNITY PLANNING COUNCIL
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October 10, 2011

Design Review Committee
Oakland Planning Commission
City of Oakland
c/o Community and Economic Development Agency
250 Frank Ogawa Plaza, Suite 2112
Oakland CA 94612

RE: Design Review for College Avenue Safeway Shopping Center Project (Case # ER09-0006).

Dear Commissioners,

We are writing on behalf of the Rockridge Community Planning Council ("RCPC"), the community organization representing the residents of Rockridge, where this project would be located. As you know, RCPC has been concerned about this project since its inception. Its location at the northern end of Oakland's portion of College Avenue makes the nature of the project crucial in maintaining College Avenue's lively and successful retail area. The College Avenue Safeway store is very important to Rockridge residents as one of the primary places to purchase basic grocery items. Replacing it by the new shopping center could greatly impact nearby Rockridge residents, as well as other College Avenue merchants.

To begin with, RCPC wants to make it clear that it is not intrinsically opposed to updating or even replacing the present College Avenue Safeway store. While the current store provides valuable service to residents of the area, RCPC recognizes that there could be significant benefits from improving the store's layout and expanding its available display and storage space. RCPC also acknowledges that the small street-level shops proposed as part of Safeway's shopping center project could, if used to expand the range of locally-owned small businesses along College Avenue, provide additional benefit to the community. However, RCPC has major concerns about the design of the shopping center, both in how it looks and how it functions. RCPC believes that, in its current configuration, the Safeway Shopping Center has major design flaws. RCPC also feels that it does not fit in well with the surrounding commercial area, made up almost entirely of small, street-level shops. For these reasons, RCPC would urge the Design Review Committee to request that Safeway revise the design for the project before the committee allows the project to move forward to the full Planning Commission for review.

As noted above, College Avenue's commercial community, both in Oakland and in neighboring Berkeley, consists almost entirely of small, locally-owned, street-level storefront shops. These are occupied by a wide variety of retail, restaurant, and service businesses. What they have in common is a focus on pedestrian-oriented comparison shopping. College Avenue's success as a retail district is built around having a lively pedestrian traffic. In this regard, the existing Safeway store has been a mixed blessing. Its large surface parking area and driveways impede pedestrian flow, but that same parking area - and Safeway's current focus on basic groceries - lure people to College Avenue from the surrounding community. Those patrons, after visiting Safeway, will often also walk to other

nearby stores. Thus the current Safeway layout encourages a pedestrian-oriented synergy that promotes College Avenue's retail environment.¹

The new layout, by contrast, places the customer parking in an enclosed structure out of sight of College Avenue. Further, the primary entrances are from Claremont Avenue, so that many Safeway patrons will not even see any College Avenue shops, but will go from their car to the elevator or escalator and into Safeway, and the reverse upon exiting. As far as these Safeway customers are concerned, College Avenue and its shops might as well be on another planet. The potential for these Safeway customers to become part of College Avenue's pedestrian traffic has been diminished.

The design of the Safeway store itself does nothing to promote synergy either. The new, large "Lifestyle" store would include a variety of departments, including florist, pharmacy, bakery, deli, and meat and fish markets, that go well beyond the usual grocery store and, in fact, duplicate many of the shopping functions found nearby on College Avenue. Whether by conscious intention or not, the effect of this, coupled with the isolation of the store from the surrounding retail community, is to further encourage customers to limit their shopping to the Safeway store itself. A somewhat smaller store that focused on providing a good selection of grocery products would do far better at promoting synergy than the multi-department Walmart-style Lifestyle store that Safeway has proposed.

There could be a higher degree of synergy between the small shops located on the street level in the shopping center and those on the surrounding portions of College Avenue, especially if they are locally owned, but the design does little to encourage the pedestrian flow that helps make College Avenue so vibrant. The shopping center's design should be revised to provide better linkages, both in design and function, to the surrounding retail community. For example, design elements such as light fixtures, signage, etc. from across the street and elsewhere on College Avenue could be mirrored in the shopping center. In addition, the pedestrian crosswalks across College Avenue should be highlighted and made to feel safe and welcoming. Special markings, including colored pavement and lighting, should be used to emphasize the crosswalks so that they are more visible to traffic and therefore safer to use.

While there is some degree of connection between the proposed Safeway shopping center and the shops across College Avenue from it, there are absolutely no ties to the shops on the other side of Claremont Avenue, despite the fact that this area is also in the same CN-1 commercial zone. Indeed, the entire Claremont frontage of the shopping center is little more than a giant "dead zone" made up of surface parking lots and blank walls, punctuated with ramps leading down to the subterranean parking area. There is absolutely nothing to entice a pedestrian to turn the corner from the center's pedestrian street onto Claremont Avenue. While the current Safeway store is not particularly well-connected to its Claremont frontage, at least it is possible for a pedestrian to enter the parking lot, and then the store, from the Claremont side. In addition, the Union 76 service station, which faced both College and Claremont, served as a bridge of sorts between the two retail areas. The current shopping center design severs even that tenuous connection and leaves the shops along Claremont Avenue totally cut off from the shopping center's block.

¹ It should be noted that recently, perhaps in preparation for the transition to a new store, Safeway has begun to rigorously enforce its requirement that parking in its lot is limited to two hours while shopping at the Safeway store, and to ticket those who go across the street, even if they have already been to and used the Safeway store for some of their shopping. We would hope the City will insist that this un-neighborly attitude not be carried forward to the new project.

Another concern with the current design is the two-lane driveway opposite 63rd Street on College Avenue. As noted, College Avenue functions best as a pedestrian-oriented area. The double-width driveway to the parking area, especially placed directly across from a connecting street, impedes pedestrian circulation and runs counter to the gains that could be made by having street-level shops on the shopping center's College Avenue frontage. Pedestrian access should also be separated from the auto driveways to promote pedestrian safety.

Several other design points also deserve mention. Safeway's current plans show the on-street bicycle parking wrapping around to the barren Claremont frontage. If the Claremont frontage is not going to be made more vibrant, the bicycle parking should be move from this dead space to closer to the store entrance, where it will be more useful. Also, the plans should be explicit is showing the specific locations of bicycle racks, so that their utility, and any location-specific problems, can be ascertained.

The pedestrian street between College and Claremont might provide some benefit if it had continuity at both ends, but there is currently nothing to draw pedestrians to or past its Claremont Avenue terminus. It would work far better (and help provide pedestrian continuity) if the shops continued around the corner onto Claremont Avenue. It would also help if there were a pedestrian entrance to the Safeway store, or at least a pedestrian entrance to the customer parking area, off of Claremont Avenue.

The second floor seating area overlooking the College/Claremont intersection, unlike the existing sidewalk cafes along College Avenue, is isolated from the pedestrian flow. While those using it would have a nice birds-eye view of the traffic at the intersection, this may not be the best draw for customers. A street-level outside seating area would better connect to the community, as well as offering better safety for night-time use.

Finally, the current design features a large "ROCKRIDGE" sign above the Safeway store. This would appear to announce that the Safeway is the gateway to Rockridge. Ironically, however, the location and direction of the sign would seem to indicate that Rockridge extends to the north of the shopping center, when in fact Rockridge ends at the northern end of the Safeway store, at the Berkeley border. RCPC feels that showing more concern for how the new store integrates into the Rockridge community would be a far better way of showing Safeway's pride in Rockridge than a large roof-top sign.

Thank you for allowing RCPC to comment as part of the design review of the College Avenue Safeway Shopping Center Project. We realize that our criticisms of the project's poor integration into the College Avenue commercial community and its many design flaws may appear negative, but we hope they will be helpful assisting in producing a better and more effective design for this important project.

Sincerely,



Stuart M. Flashman
RCPC Board Chair



Andrew Charman
RCPC Board Vice-Chair

cc: Council Member Jane Brunner
Zachary Wald