

# Orlando Sentinel

## SETTING SIGHTS ON CUSTOMERS TARGET TAKES AIM AT CLERMONT

THE CITY COUNCIL IS TO DECIDE TONIGHT WHETHER TO ALLOW A 186,500-SQUARE-FOOT MEGASTORE ON STATE ROAD 50.

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CLERMONT -- A giant shopping plaza that would house the city's biggest "box" -- nearly 200,000 square feet of affordable buys, from garden tools to groceries -- will come up for consideration tonight at what's expected to be a boisterous City Council meeting.

Developers Maury Carter and son Daryl want to build a SuperTarget at the northeast corner of State Road 50 and North Hancock Road.

But some council members and residents are against the proposed 186,500-square-foot megastore, mainly because it violates a city ordinance put in place to prevent such giant retailers from moving into town.

The decision puts a city grappling with mammoth growth at a crossroads.

Some say approving the construction of a megaretailer is akin to offering cookies and lemonade to developers, who see Clermont's city limits as little more than a welcome mat to such big boxes. On the other side of the debate are residents who say they are tired of driving to Ocoee or Orlando to shop, a commute that only worsens already clogged roads.

The Carters are asking for a variance from the council to build the SuperTarget, which would be the centerpiece in a 202,000-square-foot center, with five outparcels expected to contain restaurants, a bank and other retail stores.

They are also asking for a variance to the city's grading ordinance, which is designed to preserve the region's trademark hills and valleys. In one area, the property would drop off 50 feet from the road to the base of the proposed structure, to make room for a level parking lot with adequate spaces. The ordinance requires a grading no more than 15 feet.

Council member Elaine Renick said she can't make a decision until she hears all parties at tonight's meeting, but she is concerned most about congestion along S.R. 50.

"There's an argument out there that the number of cars won't increase whether people are going to Target on 50 or closer to Orlando," she said. "But people will have to slow down from 55 mph to enter and exit this center. Congestion has to do with more than just the number of cars."

The sheer size of the retailer also concerns her.

Council member Jeff Biddle said the completion of Hancock Road, which will ultimately empty out on Old Highway 50, will alleviate traffic on S.R. 50.

Biddle said Clermont residents want more shopping options in town. In addition, the Carters' willingness to work with the community on their proposal is something others haven't done. Two years ago, when Wal-Mart proposed a center near S.R 50 and U.S. Highway 27, the nation's biggest retailer wasn't flexible, he said.

"Instead of with Wal-Mart saying, 'This is what we want,' the Carters were willing to work with us," Biddle said.

The Planning and Zoning Commission voted 4-3 to recommend approval for the project at its meeting earlier this month. The City Council has the last word tonight at 7:30 in Jenkins Auditorium.

The Carters say the project, to be called Hancock Center, is the culmination of 10 years of planning and efforts to work with the community on everything from aesthetics to roads.

"We didn't just hop out of a truck one day and say, 'Aha, let's put a Target here,'" said Daryl Carter. "We're known as a partner with the community. We have been to workshops, countless public meetings, and have support from the surrounding property owners, city staff and planning and zoning."

The Carters have a long history in Clermont.

In 1991, they purchased 1,267 acres off S.R. 50. In the past decade they donated 40 acres for construction of a Lake-Sumter Community College campus site, but they later agreed to swap for a 112-acre site on the hilltop above where the store is to be situated. Cost to the college was \$993,000.

When the deal was done, college officials figured they got the land for \$8,867 an acre, a steal in the area. Another chunk of land was sold to South Lake Hospital for less than market value, Daryl Carter said.

The father and son are looking for support wherever they can get it, and even called on trustees at Lake-Sumter to back the plan for the Target store.

Maury Carter called on their support in a letter he distributed to trustees last week.

Although trustees agree that they are indebted to Carter, they disagreed on whether to endorse his Target project. Trustees voted 4- 3 against the endorsement, which Carter sought last week.

"We owe the Carter family a lot just for the opportunity to be in Clermont," said Jon Marshall, a trustee who was chairman of the board when the land deal was struck four years ago.

Marshall wanted the Board of Trustees to instruct college President Robert Westrick to appear at tonight's meeting and endorse the project.

Westrick was uncomfortable with that, however. A majority told Marshall it was inappropriate for the college to jump into the middle of a land development fray.

Daryl Carter said that not only does the community seem to want Target, but the economic impact on the city and the county also would be great.

The center would mean \$770,000 in impact fees and \$500,000 in annual tax revenue, Carter said. It would be worth about \$27 million once it is complete and generate about \$50 million in sales each year, he said.

In addition, he estimates the center would employ close to 800 people, 400 alone at the SuperTarget, which plans to buy, not lease, the property, making the possibility of its shutting its doors and lying vacant very slim, Carter said