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TARGET WAITING FOR CITY'S DECISION

CLERMONT OFFICIALS AND RESIDENTS DEBATED THE ISSUES OF TRAFFIC AND FLATTENING THE CITY'S FAMOUS HILLS.

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CLERMONT -- With a packed house waiting for their answer, city officials had yet to decide late Tuesday night whether to approve the construction of a Target superstore nearly twice the size allowed under city law.

The SuperTarget proposed for the northeast corner of State Road 50 and North Hancock Road would be 186,500 square feet and the centerpiece of a 202,500-square-foot shopping center.

Two years ago, the city passed its "big box" ordinance amid controversy about a proposed Wal-Mart superstore at the city's busiest intersection. The ordinance forbids a single retail store larger than 100,000 square feet.

The main concerns voiced by residents and city officials Tuesday were traffic and protecting Clermont's natural landscape.

"I have a difficult time getting past the notion that it's good planning to put it there," Mayor Hal Turville said. "The question is, do you have to give up your hills and increase traffic congestion to put this store in? We want to maintain the quality of life, and if it's approved, there's nothing you can do after the fact."

Maury and Daryl Carter, the father-and-son developers for the SuperTarget project, asked the city for a variance to its grading ordinance, which was passed last fall in an effort to preserve the region's characteristic rolling hills. It limits elevation changes on a commercial site to a maximum of 15 feet. In one area, the site of the proposed shopping center drops nearly 50 feet from the road to the ground, which is not suitable for a level parking lot.

Daryl Carter said the community wants the superstore, adding that the Carters have worked hard for the past 10 years with the surrounding community to come up with an attractive building and plan.

The Carters have asked for support from Lake-Sumter Community College and others, pointing out that their contributions to the area include donating land for the campus and selling land to the South Lake Hospital at a price below market value. Council member Marilyn MacLauchlin said Clermont's topography doesn't lend itself to big-box retail stores, but added that the advantages of the Target store outweighed the drawbacks.

"If you think about it, all the people are shopping at Target or Wal-Mart east of here on 50, and this would shorten the trip and ease the traffic," she said. "Some said it will generate some more traffic, but most of it is already out there."

Some folks simply think the size is too large.

"It's a big building, which leaves a bigger footprint and needs bigger parking," said Turville. "And more hills are lost in that scenario."

Some say the ordinance was done with only the intention of keeping out Wal-Mart, which had proposed building a store near the city's clogged intersection of U.S Highway 27 and S.R. 50.