

Midway Target hits new snags

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Council stalls vote as objections arise

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When the St. Paul City Council began its regular meeting Wednesday, most council members believed there was an agreement for Target Corp. to build the first urban SuperTarget in the Twin Cities.

Things quickly unraveled.

By the end of the meeting, Council Member Jay Benanav asked to delay the vote one week on behalf of fellow Council Member Debbie Montgomery, who was huddled in her office with several Target representatives. The two spearheaded a last-ditch effort to win several commitments — such as set percentages of minority contractors — from the retailing giant in exchange for the right to build a 184,000-square-foot grocery and retail outlet in St. Paul's Midway area.

"If Target doesn't move off their current position, I'm not going to vote for it," Benanav said after the meeting. "I was sitting in the council meeting thinking it was done. ... They had given up enough that I was ready to support it."

Benanav would not say just why the vote was delayed, but it appears to be over the wording of a resolution approving the deal.

Target representatives left City Hall without commenting, but the company released a strongly worded statement later in the evening.

"We are disappointed that at the 11th hour the City Council delayed approval on the site plan for the Midway SuperTarget. In our experience, we've never been subjected to such unrelated mandates placed upon a \$30 million privately financed project," the company said, adding that it worked with the community and that the project would benefit the area.

"We have serious concerns when elected officials use that process to limit competition or pursue agenda that works to the detriment of the guests and communities that we strive to serve. ... Further delays and such mandates will jeopardize this project."

Nevertheless, Montgomery said the deal will get done.

"I guarantee you we'll get it worked out by next week," Montgomery said.

Target is seeking to replace its current Midway store with a larger SuperTarget, which feature grocery items. The controversial project has been the subject of appeals, delays and even a protest. The City Council postponed a May 3 vote in a last-ditch effort to come up with a plan that was more pedestrian and public-transit friendly. Over the last several days, Target offered several changes that seemed to meet those goals.

The company agreed to bisect its parking lot with a tree-lined sidewalk, build a plaza and bus stop along Hamline Avenue and sell property along University Avenue for future development, possibly including a hotel. The company added trees to the site plan as well as display windows along Hamline, according to a council resolution version reviewed by the Pioneer Press.

Although community activists see Target's concessions as a step in the right direction, not all are happy with the plans.

"It's really not much. It's essentially a longer sidewalk," said Jessica Treat, executive director of the Lexington-Hamline Community Council, one of three groups that appealed to the council the Planning Commission's March approval of the SuperTarget project.

Those issues do not appear to have caused the snafu, but the company's statement also suggests that the City Council might not want Target to sell the property along University to the highest bidder, instead opting for a preferred tenant.

According to the resolution, Target made several other concessions, including agreeing to hire 80 percent of its employees from the Midway area and contribute \$200,000 toward the city's Safe Cities program. The resolution also stated that Target would work with Xcel Energy to come up with an energy-efficient building design. What percentage of minority contractors the deal would mandate, though, was unclear Wednesday night. A final resolution was never introduced.

But the union-free retailer made few concessions on the labor front. United Food and Commercial Workers Local 789 leader Bernie Hesse, who represents employees at nearby Cub Foods and Rainbow Foods, said competition from a SuperTarget could devastate those grocery stores. Local 789 also appealed the Planning Commission's decision.

Hesse lobbied council members to press Target for the right to try to organize Midway Target workers, but was unsuccessful. He led a Wednesday morning protest outside Target's Nicollet Mall headquarters in Minneapolis.

"I take this to heart, because they're wiping out some good jobs and replacing them with low-paying jobs," Hesse said.

Employees at nearby groceries are worried about the impact of a SuperTarget. Nate Prokop, an assistant store manager at the Midway Rainbow, said he expects to lose business if the store is built. However, there are no known plans to close the Rainbow.

"We give good wages to our employees so they can support families," Prokop said. "That right there is an incentive not to kill Rainbow and Cub."

Target also has found itself in a debate over the future of University Avenue. With the potential for a light-rail transit line running down the commercial artery, community activists and several members of the City Council want to avoid sprawling, suburban-style buildings in favor of higher-density, transit-oriented development.

Community planning groups such as University United — the third organization to appeal the Planning Commission's decision — tried without success to get Target to build a second story, put in a parking ramp and sell more property for development.

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