

HIGHWAY 99'S NEW VISION COUNTY, COALITION NEAR PLAN TO MAKE HAZEL DELL STRIP MORE PEDESTRIAN-FRIENDLY

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Saturday, October 31, 2009

On Highway 99, a long struggle between auto-friendly business owners and anti-car crusaders could be nearing a truce.

After 10 years of sporadic negotiation, county planners and volunteers say they're almost ready to settle on a plan for the future of Hazel Dell's pavement paradise.

But some worry that even the scaled-back designs of county planners are too optimistic about the busy corridor's potential.

Bike lanes are on the way. So are medians, though not as many as the county originally expected. Light rail or a streetcar? Not so much.

It's all part of a 20-year plan for the highway that the county commissioners and planning commission will discuss at a joint hearing Nov. 16.

Though the highway would keep two lanes in each direction and a center turn lane, it'd be narrowed from as much as 110 feet to 70 feet, said Brad Lothspeich of "Team 99," Clark County's coalition of local residents, property owners and business leaders.

That would leave about eight to 12 feet on each side of the highway for better sidewalks and landscaping.

"It'll look better," Lothspeich said Thursday. "We believe it'll be safer."

No Room For A Big Box

"The highway's great untapped asset is its width," Lothspeich said. "Its great limitation is its long line of tiny lots, too small for big new projects."

That's why the county wants to eventually transform the highway into a series of walkable shops and multistory apartments, some sort of cross between Cascade Park's Mill Plain Boulevard and southeast Portland's Division Street.

"We're not going to get box stores on Highway 99," Lothspeich said. "A lot of it is smaller businesses and living units. That's kind of the niche."

Colette Anderson, a county planner leading the effort, said she hopes that by requiring property owners to make their land slightly more pedestrian-friendly each time they redevelop it, property values will rise up and down the highway.

"Think of the difference between Salmon Creek on the north end and on the lower end of Highway 99," Anderson said. "Different atmosphere, different people, different tenants."

Slow Improvements

The key to the county's plan is a new set of rules that kicks in whenever a property owner kicks off a major redevelopment.

Each time, the redeveloper would have to choose five out of 20 options for making the site more foot-friendly.

Among the options: replacing blank walls with large windows, planting tall trees or bushes at regular intervals and separating sidewalks and streets with 4-foot-wide planters.

Ron Wilson, who owns the new Applebee's restaurant at Highway 99 near 134th Street, said he hopes that once a few properties start looking nicer, other property owners will find it worth their while to upgrade too. "That would raise everyone's property values", he said.

"We tend to want to spend our time where it's pleasant," Wilson said. "Where it isn't pleasant, we don't tend to hang out there very long."

But neither Wilson or Lothspeich think the county is offering property owners enough tax credits and fee breaks to get things rolling.

"Without good incentives, I think it's going to be tough to make it happen," Wilson said. "The county's going to have to invest money into roads. ... All your landscaping, your planters, your medians. You know, what they did over in Salmon Creek at Klineline (Bridge)."

Jim West, a Vancouver commercial real estate agent for Coldwell Banker who does business on Highway 99, said he likes some of the new vision. But he, too, thinks the county would be foolish to expect many pedestrians on all the new sidewalks or bikers on the new bike lanes.

"The landscaping things are great," West said. "The biggest complaint I've heard from property owners and developers is that a lot of it is just kind of an attack on the automobile. It's a very busy and high-speed traffic area, and I don't think we're going to change that," West said.

Anderson said the county's main goal is just to give people an alternative to car travel. "Automobiles are still going to be part of our lives," Anderson said. "What you're doing is providing an opportunity for people to have other ways of living."