



FORMER SEARS BUILDING REMODEL DOWNTOWN PERMIT

Property Location: 226 EAST MAIN STREET

Review of a Downtown Permit (DT2023-0012) for Shasta 2020, LP to remodel a former 114,000-square-foot Sears Roebuck department store building to: 1) relocate the existing outdoor loading dock, 2) divide the store building for multiple tenants, 3) construct a separate entrance for upper level tenants, 4) interior and exterior construction for a proposed 49,000-square-foot full service grocery store on the lower level, and 5) parking, landscaping, and common area improvements on a 5.39-acre project site in the town center district of the Downtown Specific Plan.

Environmental: The project was adequately covered in a previously certified Final Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the Santa Maria Downtown Specific Plan (SCH 2007041105) pursuant to California Environmental Quality Act State Guidelines Section 15162.

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RECOMMENDATION:

By motion, recommend the City Council approve Downtown Permit (DT2023-0012).

BACKGROUND

The applicant, Mark Gabay on behalf of Shasta 2020, LP, proposes to remodel an existing 114,000-square-foot former Sears Roebuck department store building to accommodate a full-service grocery store tenant (El Super), two secondary anchor tenants, and four smaller-scale retail spaces. A component of the building remodel includes relocating an existing loading dock for the grocery store tenant, adding an additional loading dock for the future secondary tenants, and renovating the parking lot and common landscaped areas.

The 5.39-acre project site is located at the southwest corner of Main Street and Miller Street and is in the SP/Town Center and Gateway District of the Downtown Specific Plan (Attachment A – Vicinity Map). The Santa Maria Town Center mall adjoins and connects to the existing two-story commercial building. Commercial uses surround the project site on all four sides, including a Town Center parking structure to the west, retail shops across Main Street to the north, and small offices to the east. All these uses are also within the Downtown Specific Plan.

The Downtown Specific Plan uses both the project's location and proposed floor area to determine which decision-making body (Zoning Administrator, Planning Commission, or City Council) shall make the determination on any Downtown Permit application. This project site is located within a "major corridor" of the downtown, and the corner of the parking lot along Main Street and Miller is considered a "critical corner". Since the project is over 10,000-square feet in size, a Downtown Permit that is reviewed by the Planning Commission for a recommendation to the City Council for final determination is required.

Downtown Revitalization Committee

This project was reviewed by the Downtown Revitalization Committee on February 12, 2025. At this meeting, the Committee received a presentation from staff and discussed all aspects of the project including the project's proposed re-use of the former department store, the project's site plan, floor plan, and overall building design. Committee members asked questions about vehicular site circulation, the proposed loading dock locations and accessibility, the connection between the project and the mall, and the proposed second floor promenade facing Miller Street. After considering the information presented, Committee members' comments regarding the project were positive.

DISCUSSION

The applicant has applied for a Downtown Permit to remodel an existing 114,000-square-foot former Sears Roebuck department store in the Town Center East Mall. The existing two-story building was approved under the Town Center Redevelopment Project and was constructed in 1986. Sears Roebuck occupied the building until 2020. Since its closure, the building has remained unoccupied.

The project proposes to divide the building to accommodate multiple tenants including a 51,117-square-foot ground-floor El Super grocery store, and two approximately 24,000-square-foot second floor tenant spaces, and up to four smaller tenant spaces (800-square-feet each) fronting the eastern portion of the building along Miller Street in the former Sears Tire Center.

Downtown Specific Plan

The Santa Maria Downtown Specific Plan (DTSP) establishes a vision, regulations, and guidelines to revitalize, beautify, and redevelop the downtown core of the City of Santa Maria. The project meets the intent of the Specific Plan by reusing an existing vacant retail building, and proposing site, architectural and landscaping improvements. The project provides the following improvements encouraged by the Downtown Specific Plan:

- New large storefront openings on Miller Street. This will activate the Miller Street frontage.
- Refreshed existing parking lot landscaping with drought-tolerant plantings of trees, shrubs and groundcovers, and new potted plants at the building storefront entrances.
- Proposed street trees where there are gaps in the existing street tree canopy.
- A well painted building, where the architectural style connects smoothly with the existing Town Center building.

- Pedestrian amenities include outdoor seating and dining opportunities, bicycle racks, and pedestrian paths from the street to the building entrances. New pedestrian walkways wrap around the outside of the building.
- Additional architectural features such as awnings, crown molding, and use of additional building materials such as tile.

Floor Plan and Land Uses

El Super grocery store will occupy the entirety of the ground floor anchor space and is a full-service supermarket with grocery, produce, seafood, fresh meat, frozen food, dairy, alcoholic beverages, bakery, and tortillaría departments. This floor plan will also include a restaurant component with a counter for ordering and tables for dining in. Primary ingress and egress will be provided from the parking lot, however, interior access from El Super into the Town Center Mall will also be provided.

The interior escalators connecting the first and second floors of the former Sears will be removed. The openings between the floors will be filled in to create fully independent tenant spaces. The second level floor plan includes new openings in the building with a new shared lobby and open-air terrace facing Miller Street. A partition wall would be proposed to run east to west to accommodate up to two 24,000-square-foot tenant spaces. While these spaces have yet to be leased, retail commercial, restaurant, or entertainment uses could all be considered via an administrative Downtown Permit to be approved by the Zoning Administrator. As a Condition of Approval (No. 21 of Attachment B), Staff recommends, as an incentive for the project, that the City Council authorize future Downtown Permits on the site to be administrative when otherwise a public hearing would be required.

The former Sears Tire Center bays are proposed to be remodeled and repurposed to accommodate potential retail commercial, restaurant, or entertainment uses. Up to four approximately 775-square foot tenant spaces would be created. These spaces would be remodeled with storefront windows and are sized to accommodate smaller-scale “mom and pop” businesses. If a business had a need for a larger tenant space, there would be flexibility to occupy two or more suites. These storefronts would open onto a 20-foot-wide walkway/promenade that could accommodate outdoor dining shielded from Santa Maria’s winds.

Architecture

The existing building is constructed of concrete split-face masonry block with a 20-foot-tall arched covered breezeway along the northerly and westerly building exteriors, topped by S-tile mansard roof elements. The existing easterly building exterior is occupied by a similar S-tile mansard but includes garage bays rather than a breezeway. The applicant proposes modifying the northerly breezeway to a contemporary architectural style. This elevation would be updated while retaining some of the design elements prevalent in the Town Center area, such as S-tile roofing and ceramic tile base accents. New stucco is proposed along the covered breezeway, which will be revised to present the clean lines prevalent in the contemporary modern style.

The easterly elevation facing Miller Street is to be transformed from a former tire center to a dual-level pedestrian promenade with large storefront windows that open to the wide walkway, parking lot and the public street beyond. The S-tile mansard roof over the ground floor is to be removed and replaced with pedestrian metal railings for the second-floor open air terrace and second-floor storefront windows behind. A cohesive color scheme is proposed on all three exterior elevations. A common color scheme includes the sand-colored split face block, and dark grey accents on the cornices, guard rails and storefront windows.

Parking

According to the Parking Incentive Map (Figure 8, page 45) of the Downtown Specific Plan, the subject property is within Parking Incentive Zone A (within 700 feet of a City parking lot/structure). There are no parking requirements for the retail commercial uses proposed by the project within this parking incentive zone. However, the project provides 237 parking spaces on site for use by customers and employees. Bicycle parking is offered near the building entrances. The project is conditioned to require additional onsite bicycle parking in accordance with the City's adopted Active Transportation Plan.

Traffic Circulation

A Traffic, Circulation and VMT study was prepared by Associated Transportation Engineers (ATE) for the project and was reviewed by Public Works Engineering Division and Planning Division staff. The existing loading docks on the northeast corner of the building are proposed to be removed and relocated to the southwest corner of the building where existing mall loading and delivery activities occur along Town Center Drive. A question that was raised at the Downtown Revitalization Committee was regarding semi-truck access in, around, and out of the site. There was concern by the committee that there was insufficient maneuverability in the proposed loading bay locations. The applicant has responded to this concern by providing a truck route exhibit (Sheet A-101 of the Plan set, Attachment C of this staff report), which demonstrates each turning movement depending on truck direction and route. The pedestrian bridges from the parking structures to the project building and the mall are confirmed to be highway rated and a semi-truck can pass through without issue. Three loading docks are proposed on the western side of the building. Two of the loading docks are interior or partially interior to the building. The third loading dock is exterior to the building, which requires the truck to parallel park along the building face. This space is approximately 67-foot-long and could accommodate a semi-truck with a 45-foot-long trailer without intruding into the drive aisle.

The automobile delay (Level of Service or LOS) in the surrounding intersections with the project would meet the City's LOS D standard, which was the standard studied in the EIR for the Downtown Specific Plan. The project would not create any substantially more severe effects than what was previously addressed in the EIR. LOS is no longer a significant impact as a matter of law. Vehicle Miles Traveled exceeding an applicable threshold of significance may indicate a significant impact according to the CEQA Guidelines. As discussed in the ATE study, this is a redevelopment project where the proposed use would replace a use that generates Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT), there would be no net increase in overall VMT. Therefore, the project would not create any new

or substantially more severe traffic impacts than what was previously examined in the EIR.

Landscape

The project proposes reorienting the northwest parking lot to allow grocery store patrons access to the store entrance with shopping carts. The landscape planters in this area are proposed to be removed and new planters are proposed with new landscaping. Fifteen pear trees are requested for removal. The City Arborist has accepted these trees for removal and has required large-sized replacements. The large mature magnolia and eucalyptus trees on the eastern side of the parking area are to be protected in place, and a tree protection plan is required to be approved by the Community Development Department and Recreation and Parks Department prior to permit issuance. Fifty-nine new trees are proposed.

Environmental

The project was adequately covered in a previously certified programmatic Final Environmental Impact Report prepared for the Santa Maria Downtown Specific Plan (SCH 2007041105) pursuant to California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) State Guidelines Section 15162, which states that when an EIR has been certified for a project, no subsequent EIR shall be prepared for that project unless the lead agency determines, on the basis of substantial evidence in the light of the whole record: (1) substantial changes are proposed in the project that will require major revision of the EIR; (2) substantial changes occur in the circumstances under which the project is being undertaken that will require major revisions in the EIR; or (3) new information of substantial importance to the project that was not known and could not have been known at the time the EIR was certified as complete becomes available.

None of the conditions specified in CEQA Section 15162 requiring the preparation of a subsequent EIR have occurred with the proposed project. Therefore, the proposed project may rely on the previously certified programmatic Final Environmental Impact Report prepared for the Santa Maria Downtown Specific Plan (SCH 2007041105) as adequate environmental review under CEQA. No further environmental review is required.

Attachments

- A – Vicinity Map
- B – Permit
- C – Plan Set
- D – Traffic, Circulation and VMT Study