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Manchester Planning Board hears Walmart application

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TOMS RIVER BUREAU

Developers of a proposed Walmart on Route 37 West would widen the highway and Northampton Boulevard, adding multiple new lanes and turn signals to speed added traffic generated by the combination retail and grocery store complex.

A first version of the plan presented in 2005 left some residents dissatisfied with traffic mitigation measures, and "because of all that, we took another look at it, said Robert Rodgers of Orth-Rodgers & Associates Inc, a traffic engineering firm with offices in Lawrence Township.

New plans Rodgers prepared for Walmart and local site developer Jay Grunin would add two dedicated left-turn lanes and signals for drivers to turn onto Route 37 from Northampton Boulevard, which is a major feeder road out of residential neighborhoods and is already subject to prolonged delays during rush hours.

Route 37 westbound would be widened with an additional right turn lanes to steer motorists onto Northampton Boulevard northbound, or into the reverse jug handle to cross Route 37 and reach the store parking lot. While project engineers cannot say directly how much of the business will redirect to the new location, they said some 54 percent of the new store's traffic will be coming out of Toms River and using that jug handle, Rodgers said.

Traffic is just one issue in the controversial Walmart plan, which has pitted the national retailer against local supermarket owners, retail labor unions and threatened northern pine snakes in the woods south of Route 37. Monday night's hearing continued the developers' presentation to the Manchester Planning Board, and Robert Shea, the applicants' lawyer, said they will need yet another meeting to finish. That meeting will be held March 10 at 7 p.m., said board attorney Edward Liston.

In addition to the Walmart store, Grunin would also christen the site Northampton Square — an identity for future commercial development, said site plan engineer Michael Moonen. Grunin would welcome shoppers with a large sculpture depicting two adults and two children and flags, a trademark of his other commercial developments.

The store will generate up to 700 additional automobiles coming and going at peak times during weekdays and around 900 at Saturday peak hours, Rodgers said. Peak traffic on Route 37 runs around 2,633 vehicles per hour between 4:15 p.m. and 5:15 p.m. on weekdays, and 2,160 on Saturdays from 12:30 p.m. to 1:30 p.m., Rodgers said.

Those traffic counts were updated last fall, and engineers found they were actually 2.5 percent less than in 2004 when they started work on the project.

His analysis also accounts for the effect of traffic from the Toms River schools' bus depot on nearby Executive Drive. Those empty buses stream back to the yard between 4 p.m. and 4:10 p.m.

The planning board engineer, Albert Yodakis, asked if "there would be sufficient stacking" for buses when they queue up for the traffic signal. Rodgers, who talked to Toms River school transport officials while making his plan, said a reconstructed Northampton Boulevard intersection could make it easier for those buses to maneuver and generally reduce the rush hour delays. Those backups now get the

intersection a poor rating in the state Department of Transportation's performance ratings, he said.

Combined with adjusting the timing on Route 37 traffic signals to the east in Toms River, those improvements would bring "a tremendous bump in capacity" at the Northampton intersection, he said.

But board members questioned if the widening would make it any easier for drivers to get out of the new combination Wawa convenience store and gas station already under construction on the northeast corner of the intersection. Rodgers said he's looked at the traffic study that was done for Wawa, and thinks the improvements will help access to that property.

This is the second attempt to win permit approvals for the project on the Toms River-Manchester border, which was turned down once before by state environmental regulators.

State objections then centered on the discovery of a northern pine snake, a state threatened species, on the Manchester side of the property, and the extent of planned tree-clearing for the site. Environmental activists are focusing their pressure again on the state Department of Environmental Protection, with arguments the revised plan still fails to conform to the Coastal Area Facility Review Act, said Greg Auriemma of the Sierra Club's Ocean County chapter.
