

Christie project gets city approval

By Russ Morgan

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The city commission on Wednesday night moved forward with plans to bring Lowe's to Emporia.

The commission voted 5-0 to create a Transportation Development District to finance part of the costs of infrastructure improvements at the site at the northeast corner of 24th Avenue and Industrial Road.

A 1 percent sales tax within the district will help finance the construction and improvement of streets, signs and signals, streetscape improvements and other infrastructure projects related to the site.

"(One) goal is to improve certain infrastructure things that we're going to have to pay for anyway," Commissioner Jim Kessler said. "To me, this is a start."

The commission then voted 4-1 to adopt an ordinance creating a redevelopment agreement that specifies the obligations of the developer, D.J. Christie. Commissioner Julie Johnson cast the dissenting vote.

"This is one of those issues for me that is an honest difference of opinion and an honest difference in philosophy of what the role of government is in retail development," Johnson said. "... My research and my reading has led me to conclude that TIFs and TDDs, while they may look good on paper, in the long run really do not work as far as retail economic development tools. ..."

The development agreement has a built-in expiration of 24 months, to ensure the development is started in that time frame. According to a preliminary schedule, construction could begin as early as July. Dave Christie said the plan is to have Phase One of the project, with Lowe's finished and open for business, wrapped up in December of 2010.

Commissioner Jeff Longbine said the agreement was strong and well thought-out and was put together with protections for the city.

"What started out as a bond issue quickly became pay-as-you-go," Longbine said, describing Christie's agreement to pay for construction and site work with private loans because of the state of the bond market. "The developer is the one who has a stake in the game at this point. ... I think the important thing to remember is that no money will be reimbursed or paid to this project until this project is generating revenue."

Longbine said if the project performs as expected, it will be paid off sooner. If it doesn't, "the developer's going to end up short."

The struggling economy could mean delays in the project, but supporters of the plan say that Lowe's is committed to coming to town.

"It may get protracted further," Kent Heermann, Regional Development Association president, said. "I think Lowe's is optimistic on the economy, but they're also realistic. The economy will turn, it's just when."

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