

Panel OKs tower's height at more than twice current limit

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The YMCA of Honolulu's plan to put up a condominium tower at the site of the Central YMCA on Atkinson Drive moved out of the City Council Zoning and Planning Committee on Thursday, positioning it for a final vote at next month's Council meeting.

The approval of Bill 44 came despite lingering concerns of neighbors in the densely populated neighborhood about increased traffic, loss of view planes and aesthetics. A final vote is expected at the Council's next meeting, Oct. 9.

A 128-unit condominium tower is planned for the 1.8-acre property. Existing zoning already allows for 120 units to be built there, but the rezoning would allow a tower as high as 350 feet, significantly taller than the existing limit of 150 feet.

The developers argue that the taller tower would allow for a slimmer — and more aesthetically pleasing — building profile.

But Grace Lam, who lives in the neighborhood and is a member of the Y, told committee members that "the rezoning is going to aggravate a lot of problems already in the area," including homelessness and loss of airflow.

Sunset Towers resident Curt Carson said he's worried additional traffic caused by the new tower will make it difficult for him to reach Ala Moana Boulevard because it would mean a more difficult left turn onto Atkinson Drive.

Carson urged the Council to seek an independent traffic study, not one paid for by the developer, before approving the rezoning.

"The real-life impact of this building going up, I believe, is going to be significantly greater than has been indicated on their traffic impact assessment report," he said. Atkinson "is such a key pipeline between Kapiolani Boulevard and Ala Moana Boulevard."

Both city and developer officials said the traffic report was based on 150 units being built and that the developer is being required to put in place a number of traffic improvements as well as a new pedestrian walkway.

The report estimated the new tower would not have a major impact on traffic, and generate a maximum of 60 additional cars an hour.

The Ala Moana/Kakaako Neighborhood Board also opposes the rezoning.

The YMCA sold a portion of its Atkinson property to the tower developer and is using some of the proceeds for a new three-story Yon the site.

The committee also gave its nod of approval to a rezoning allowing expansion of the Kapaa Industrial Park next to Kawai-nui Marsh. The change would add about 27 acres for light industrial uses.

Council Zoning Chairman Ikaika Anderson said warehouse and industrial space is badly needed in Windward Oahu and many area businesses now need to travel to West Oahu for such spaces.

Despite the developer's insistence that it is using state-of-the-art storm water and wastewater treatment systems, the expansion continues to draw stiff opposition from the Kailua Neighborhood Board and environmental group Hawaii's Thousand Friends.

Expanding industrial use will add to the amount of harmful nitrogen and phosphorous that winds up in Kawai-nui Marsh, and the landowner should be required to hook up the project to the city sewer line rather than be allowed to rely on a septic system, opponents argue.

They have also raised concerns about an increased potential for flooding.

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