



Mobil Super Pantry will get new look, be expanded

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A nearly 50-year-old service station and convenience store at MacArthur Boulevard and Ash Street should have a new look by next summer, including a larger store, landscaping and toned-down lighting.

Corporate owners of what is now a Mobil Super Pantry also plan to apply for a package-liquor license, though a representative said Thursday the company will limit sales to beer and wine in response to neighborhood concerns.

“That facility is 48 years old today, and 15 to 20 years is the average life expectancy for a convenience store,” Brian Wentz of Tri Star Marketing Inc. told the MacArthur Boulevard Business Association.

Pending city approval, Wentz said work on the \$1 million project should begin in March and take about three months. Champaign-based Tri Star operates 50 convenience stores in Illinois and two in Indiana.

Plans are to convert the store, which closes from midnight to 6 a.m., to a 24-hour operation. It will be about 1,000 square feet larger than the existing store, but will be moved back from the street.

Wentz said Tri Star expects to add landscaping and to install direct lighting that would spread less glare into surrounding neighborhoods. The new store also will focus more on groceries and outdoor products.

“It’s hard to believe, but there’s no money in gas. You’ve got to get customers inside the store,” he said.

Questions from nearby residents and business owners during the meeting, held at the American Red Cross headquarters on Outer Park Drive, centered on the proposal to add package liquor sales.

“We have schools and churches nearby,” said Julie Dirksen, who lives near the Mobil Super Pantry. “I’m a mother and a grandmother, and I want to make sure this area is safe for our children.”

Wentz said the company is willing to limit sales to beer and wine as part of its proposal to the city. Some Tri Star stores do sell hard liquor, he said, “but it’s not something we’re big into. We do not consider it a convenience item.”

The company also is willing to consider screening displays of items such as mulch and other outdoor products.

It has been about a year since the MacArthur Boulevard Business Association was formed to promote redevelopment along the boulevard. Much of the effort has targeted the stretch between South Grand and Wabash avenues.

The association was formed partly in response to work on the MacArthur extension, which will connect Wabash with Interstate 72. A commercial, retail and recreational “lifestyle” also is planned at the south end of the extension.

Several association members expressed disappointment Thursday that a TitleMax outlet is joining other payday and short-term loan stores along the boulevard. TitleMax is moving into space at 2115 S. MacArthur Blvd. formerly occupied by Payless Shoes, which closed in September.

But association board member Michelle Stewart Higginbotham said there also are some encouraging plans in the works, including an upscale shopping center proposed on the site of the old Esquire theater at MacArthur and South Grand Avenue.

“It keeps getting closer, and we’re hoping we can make a big announcement any day,” Higginbotham said.

Ward 7 Ald. Debbie Cimarossa, who represents the area, said she plans a meeting after the holidays with Mayor Tim Davlin and city economic development officials to discuss the possibility of a tax increment financing district or some other type of business district to encourage development along MacArthur.

“Things are rolling, maybe not as quickly as we like, but I have the mayor’s and the aldermen’s ear on MacArthur Boulevard,” she said.

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