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Fairfield may get county's first Panera drive-thru

By Lot Tan

Staff Writer

FAIRFIELD — Fairfield may soon welcome Butler County's first Panera Bread drive-thru.

Fairfield officials are considering modifying a 2.5-acre piece of land on South Gilmore road near the Meijer store, 6325 S. Gilmore Road, that has been a perpetual open green space since 1995.

The plan, according to developer Brandicorp, is to build a retail shopping center, tentatively called The Shoppes of Fairfield, that includes a drive-thru Panera Bread restaurant.

The city's planning commission is expected to present its decision to city council members next week, according to Tim Bachman, Fairfield's development services director.

"Given what's out there now, given change in the corridor, I think that a project that produces a better gateway is a better use," Bachman said of the planned development.

Council members are expected to make a final decision about the green space and the retail project in October.

If the plan is approved, owners of the Panera Bread, 500 Kolb Drive, would relocate to the new site.

"We opened in 2000 and love the area," said Craig Flom, president of Breads of the World LLC, a franchisee of Panera Bread. "We'd like to be the neighborhood's cafe, and Fairfield allows us to have that. It's a great partner."

Flom said his company has 31 stores in the Cincinnati and Dayton market, including one drive-thru Panera Bread restaurant at the Austin Landing development near Dayton. The restaurant that would relocate is currently across the street from the possible future development

Flom said he expects to hire 60 workers and four managers if the development is approved.

Developers had told city officials that the Fifth Third Bank at 6120 S. Gilmore Road was also interested in a location at The Shoppes of Fairfield, but bank officials said Wednesday that is no longer the case.

"We were at one point considering the location, but we no longer are," said Jeff Kursman, Fifth Third Bank spokesman. "Ultimately, we've decided to stay where we are."

The Shoppes of Fairfield development would mark a significant positive change in the city's economic climate, according to Greg Kathman, economic development manager.

"There hasn't been much new construction over the past few years during the economic downturn," he said. "While there hasn't been a lot of recent new construction, there has been a lot of re-investment in the corridor in recent years. The \$10 million upgrade to exit 39 off of I-275 is substantially complete. This upgrade should improve safety and improve traffic flow in the corridor."

Two of Fairfield's largest employers — Cincinnati Financial Corporation and Mercy Health Fairfield Hospital — are located in the corridor, along with other office and retail businesses.

Staff Writer Chelsey Levingston contributed to this story.

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