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OR groups face off over bond issue

Two sides debate if city should help pay for shopping center

By BOB FOWLER, fowlerb@knews.com
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OAK RIDGE -- Representatives of two grassroots groups squared off Tuesday in a forum over the hot-button issue of this city election cycle -- a bond issue to underwrite site work for a shopping center.

Citizens Oak Ridge, or COR, led the petition drive to put the referendum on the June 5 ballot, and members oppose the bond issue.

Future of Oak Ridge, or FOR, was formed to support the referendum.

An audience of more than 120 people watched the forum, sponsored by the League of Women Voters and filmed for local rebroadcast.

Up for debate is whether Oak Ridge should issue up to \$6 million in bonds to help pay for site work for Crestpointe of Oak Ridge.

That upscale shopping center, to be anchored by a SuperTarget, is being considered for a 60-acre site atop Pine Ridge that would be costly to make ready.

COR members say it's the wrong project at the wrong site and an unfair subsidy of retailers that will harm existing businesses.

There's been a forced, hurry-up schedule for the city's role in the project and a lack of "transparency," COR President Bill Schramm said.

There's no commitment by Target to locate in the center, and the project doesn't mesh with existing plans to develop the old Oak Ridge Mall, he said.

Two candidates for City Council in the June 5 election -- Ellen Smith and Fred Childress -- also voiced opposition to the bond issue.

Smith said the project would move the city's existing retail center to the edge of town and create traffic woes. Childress said the city is downplaying the new public service costs for such a center.

Oak Ridge Mayor David Bradshaw said the center would reverse the trend for residents to shop outside the city. Local schools need those sales tax dollars that are now going elsewhere, he said.

FOR supporters said the center also would create about 800 new jobs, and there's no other suitable site for such a project in Oak Ridge.

It's estimated that property tax revenue from Crestpointe tenants would recoup the city's \$10.5 million total cost for site work in about 13 years, Deputy City Manager Steve Jenkins said.

A number of safeguards have been put in place to protect the city, Jenkins said, including proof that a SuperTarget will anchor the center and a guarantee from the developer, GBT Realty Corp., that it will have at least 400,000 square feet of retail stores and will be 80 percent complete within two years of startup.



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