

The Press Democrat

Planning Commission denies gas station proposal in southwest Santa Rosa, the last such project citywide

The proposal's latest iteration was submitted to the Planning Commission in late 2021 and was exempt from the city's ban on new gas stations, which took effect a year later.



Environmentalists, health care providers, residents and other community members rallied in opposition to a proposed gas station on 874 N. Wright Rd. in Santa Rosa during an event hosted by the Coalition Opposing New Gas Stations on March 25, 2025. (Courtesy of Karen Preuss)



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Plans for what would've been the last gas station ever built in Santa Rosa — and potentially countywide — were tossed by city planning officials who argued it would pose a health and safety hazard to the surrounding community.

After a three-hour hearing, the Santa Rosa Planning Commission voted 6-0 Thursday to deny a conditional use permit for the project on a vacant lot south of Highway 12 on North Wright Road.

Commissioners said the project was inconsistent with city land-use policies and climate action goals that call for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

The project had been in the works for nearly two decades and included six gas pumps and four electric charging stations.

The latest iteration was submitted to the city in late 2021 and was exempt from the [city's ban on new gas stations](#), which took effect a year later.

Commissioners said that while the exemption allowed them to consider the project, it didn't require them to approve it.

Approving it would undermine the city's climate emergency and the ban, which is based on a number of public health and environmental dangers associated with gas stations, they said.

“When I look at (the ban) and I look at the findings we have to make tonight, particularly making a finding that this use would not be injurious to the public, I can't do that,” Commissioner Patti Cisco said. “It flies in the face of all the evidence to the contrary that we've been collecting.”

Nearly two dozen environmentalists, health care providers, nearby residents and other community members spoke out against the project on Thursday. More wrote into the city.

Woody Hastings, a co-coordinator of the Coalition Opposing New Gas Stations, said members felt their concerns resonated with the commission.

“We are very pleased with the outcome,” he said. “This was a case where the community rose up in opposition to a proposal that had many significant problems and conflicts with the city's own rules.”

The developer has 10 days to appeal to the City Council.

Santa Rosa in August 2022 became the largest city in the United States to ban the construction of new gas stations and expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure at existing stations in city limits.

It would not close any of the 44 operating gas stations citywide.

Two proposals already under review at the time by planning staffers, the North Wright Road project and another in east Santa Rosa, were exempted.

In addition to the fuel pumps and electric vehicle chargers, plans for Elm Tree Station, as the North Wright Road proposal is known, included a 3,448-square-foot neighborhood market and a one-bedroom apartment above the market.

A smaller retail space and a grassy area with benches and picnic tables were planned south of the market.

Property owners also proposed adding two connections from the property to the Joe Rodota Trail, which runs along the northern property line.

Harmon Dhillon, the property owner's son, said Thursday the project would benefit the southwest Santa Rosa neighborhood by adding a community market that sells fresh food. Developing the site also would help clean up and maintain the trail and surrounding area, he said.

The project has fierce opposition from a broad cross section of community members.

Among their concerns, community members said leaks from underground storage tanks can harm soil and groundwater, a particular issue at the site because it's prone to flooding. Emissions and other fumes pollute the air, and components of those gasses can cause adverse health effects, they said.

Those impacts are often acutely felt in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods and communities of color, where the fossil fuel industry has long situated stations and refinery operations, exacerbating health impacts on already vulnerable people, they said.

"None of the neighbors I've talked to about this project think it's a good idea," Laurel Chambers, a public health professional and mom who lives in the Vintage Oaks neighborhood across Highway 12, told commissioners. "This project is not needed and it's not wanted."

Another resident who lives on Miles Avenue, less than a mile southwest of the site, said while the neighborhood needs amenities like a neighborhood market, electric vehicle charging stations and improved bike paths and green space, they shouldn't come at the expense of residents' well-being.

Several speakers raised concerns about the site's proximity to an adjacent business, Blue Star Gas, that sells and dispenses propane and said it posed a safety risk in the event of a fire.

Community members also took issue with an environmental study conducted in 2013 when the project was approved. It found no substantial impacts at the time. The study, they said, was outdated and didn't adequately account for newer research about the health and environmental hazards tied to gas stations.

Planning staffers determined the project was consistent with the city's land-use designation and that a gas station is allowed under the property's zoning with a conditional use permit.

The plans were reviewed by the California Department of Transportation because of its proximity to Highway 12. Developers also received necessary approvals from the regional Water Quality Control Board and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Planning staffers recommended that the Planning Commission approve the project.

Commissioners, however, said they couldn't make the necessary findings to do so.

Vice Chair Vicki Duggan said the intersection of Highway 12 and Wright Road is considered a major entry to the city and projects in the vicinity should enhance the area.

The gas station, she said, wasn't a suitable use of the site.

She argued the neighborhood market is prohibited within the planned development zoning district where the property is located and the on-site residential unit also is inconsistent with zoning regulations that prohibit gas stations from being located adjacent to a single-family home or duplex.

The new rules won't force the city's 44 gas stations to close, but will place some limits on them.

Beyond land use and zoning issues, commissioners raised many of the same environmental and public health concerns brought up by community members.

They found the 2013 environmental study was outdated and that a more recent addendum didn't adequately study known potential hazards and therefore the project didn't comply with state environmental regulations.

“I think the city made its position on gas stations known when it adopted the ban and in good faith told this applicant that it could proceed but I do feel there have been risks identified ... that have not been properly addressed,” Commissioner Charles Carter said.

The commission’s decision to break with staff’s recommendation required planning and legal staffers to call a recess so they could craft a new resolution on the fly denying the approval for the commission’s consideration.

Commissioner Terry Sanders recused himself because of a personal relationship with a project representative.

Hastings, with the Coalition Opposing New Gas Stations, which emerged in 2019 and has helped push bans on new gas stations across the county, said members were grateful for the commission’s “careful consideration.”

“We felt that the concerns about risks to public health and well-being were heard,” he said.

The denial means no additional gas stations will be built in Santa Rosa unless the decision is overturned by the City Council.

The other project under consideration when the city’s gas station ban went into effect has since been withdrawn by the applicant, a city spokesperson confirmed.

Countywide, there are prohibitions on new gas stations in more than half the cities and in unincorporated county. Healdsburg, Cloverdale and Sonoma don’t have bans.

Hastings said he’s not aware of any proposals for new gas stations in those cities but the coalition continues to engage officials to push for land-use policies prohibiting construction.

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