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Residents attend meeting to hear potential impact of Wal-Mart Supercenter

By PHILLIP HERMANN - Daily News Staff

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HARTFORD - A group of about 80 people attended a meeting Thursday night at VFW Memorial Hall to hear about the potential impact of a new Wal-Mart Supercenter on Highway 60 west in their community.

Concerns were raised about the new store's impact on quality of life, the economic vitality of downtown merchants and other small retailers, traffic congestion and the impact on the environment.

The meeting was organized by Scott Lopas, owner of WTKM radio station, and Hartford resident Marilyn Raschka to provide information on the plan to build the 183,198-square-foot retail store on 27 acres across from the Pleasant Hill Cemetery. An additional 16 acres in the development will accommodate outparcel commercial sites, rights-of-way access and a new frontage road that will service the various stores and/or restaurants.



Amber King

An opponent grabs a sign at a town hall meeting Thursday to discuss a proposal to build a Wal-Mart Supercenter in Hartford.

The site is currently in the town of Hartford and annexation must be approved by the city for the project to move forward.

Prior to the meeting, resident June Mergenthaler said she came to hear all the "pros and cons" about the project.

"I'm keeping an open mind, but I want to know more about what this is all about," she noted.

For more than two hours, a steady stream of speakers raised the spectre that the new Wal-Mart would go a long way toward destroying important elements of the growing community.



Amber King

Pete and Joann Engelke of Hartford watch a movie about the negative impact a Wal-Mart store has on a community during a meeting organized by opponents to discuss a proposal to bring the retail giant to Hartford.

Dr. James Algiers said he doesn't understand why a city council and mayor that have put a priority on controlled growth in the past are suddenly willing to risk it all by allowing a large retailer that will create a nightmarish traffic situation from its site through the downtown intersection of highways 60 and 83. Organizers of the meeting said the new store will generate more than 11,000 traffic trips per day to and from the site.

"By placing this large corporate building at this site, they will be aggravating a situation that is already an

immense problem. It just doesn't make sense," said Algiers, who encouraged those in attendance to call Mayor Scott Henke and the alderpersons to let their voices be heard. "I think we can still retrieve this."

Lopas agreed.

"We can't roll over on this now and decide that this is already done. We need to keep pressuring our mayor and the council. There's no need for this to be approved on Tuesday (the March 28 council meeting). They need to study this from top to bottom," Lopas said.

Jeff Gonyo, leader of the Highway J Citizens Group in the town of Polk, offered his assistance in helping residents create an activist group that could stand united to fight the Wal-Mart plan.

"This is a regional problem, not just a Hartford problem. You have to hire your own experts and your own attorney because Wal-Mart has their experts," Gonyo said.

Raschka said the stakes are very high and worth getting involved.

"These are big questions and you have to pass them on to the council members. These people on Tuesday are voting to change your lives," Raschka said.

Hartford Aldermanic District 3 candidate David Ziemer said that as a co-owner of Curious Worlds in downtown Hartford, he acknowledges he has a vested interest in keeping the downtown's economic vitality. But he added that the Wal-Mart would have a negative financial impact on a number of other stores that are not necessarily located in the downtown.

Criticizing Wal-Mart's labor practices, Ziemer added, "That's not a good corporate citizen. ... I'm scared to death about what's going to happen."

Guest speaker Brent Benzin from the Midwest Environmental Advocacy Center in Madison said residents have every right to make their opposition known to their elected officials and to question the potentially negative impacts of the proposed store.

"(The council) needs to take a solid look at what's going to happen in Hartford after a Wal-Mart store goes in. There hasn't been an economic impact study done and that's a question you should ask," he told residents.

Benzin also questioned the location of the new store, saying that good planning techniques usually start with placing commercial ventures in the downtown area and working outward from that central location. Allowing a 27-acre commercial development that offers the product-line Wal-Mart has is essentially creating an entirely new downtown shopping area.

"Something of that scale, you need to do the economic impact study," he added.

Next Step:

Common Council is scheduled to vote on the annexation, developer's

agreement, rezoning and landscaping conceptual plan at its meeting on Tuesday beginning at 7 p.m. at the Hartford City Hall.

It would take a "super majority" (six of nine aldermen) to approve the annexation.

There will be a public hearing prior to any discussion or vote by the council.

The Hartford Planning Commission has already recommended approval of all aspects of the Wal-Mart project.