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Council favors Wal-Mart resolutions

Differing views expressed at hearing

By Steve Van Dien
Correspondent

After hearing some three hours' worth of vigorous but generally respectful opposition from numerous residents who packed the Common Council chambers March 28, the board voted 7-2 to approve two resolutions toward bringing a Wal-Mart Supercenter to Hartford.

The first approved annexation of property owned by Gary and Laura Doll, comprising some 43 acres north of Highway 60 and west of the United Cooperative, across from the Pleasant Hill Cemetery, from the town of Hartford. The resolution also assigned a temporary zoning of A-1 Agricultural to the property.

The second resolution approved rezoning the property to B-2 Community Business, B-5 Highway Business, and C-1 Lowland Conservancy, to accommodate the Supercenter. About 160 residents attended the meeting, with at least thirty more watching the proceedings on a monitor outside the chambers. Public hearings preceded both votes. Before the first, Mayor Scott Henke assured the audience that the commission would hear everyone who had signed up to speak.

"I'm sure this body wants to hear everybody's opinions," he said.

As part of the developer's agreement, Wal-Mart will take several measures to address the additional traffic the Supercenter will inevitably attract.

These include:

Extending Highway 60 to a four-lane highway;

Putting traffic signals at the Highway 60/Liberty Avenue intersection, plus left-and-right turn lanes;

Adding turn lanes and a median at the Highway 60/Independence Avenue intersection.

Wal-Mart will pay for that work, as well as five years' worth of taxes to the town of Hartford required by state annexation law.

With an estimated valuation of \$14 million, the Supercenter will bring the city more than \$92,000 in annual revenues, said City Planner Justin Drew.

Regarding the potential for increased police calls, Drew said, the Police Department averages 60 calls per year at the Hartford Plaza, which is the city business closest in size to the proposed development. City staff expects the same for the Supercenter.

John Bisio, Wal-Mart regional manager, said the Supercenter will bring some 300 new jobs to the city, at an hourly rate of \$10.50 per hour.

"They're not dead-end jobs," Bisio said. "This project represents an opportunity to better serve Hartford."

In Wisconsin alone, Wal-Mart spends some \$5.2 million in community projects, such as literacy grants, Bisio said, adding that Supercenters have benefited West Bend and Menomonee Falls, among other communities.

Residents speaking in favor of the Supercenter included Common Council candidate

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Justin Graef.

"The city is not paying a single dime toward this," Graef said. "As far as I can see, the benefits are endless."

Veronica Cook urged Wal-Mart opponents to "give it a chance.

"Free enterprise is one of our rights as Americans," Cook said.

Residents have expressed concern about the Supercenter's potential for harming local businesses. When the city planned the current K-Mart, Cook said, there were similar concerns.

"But [local businesses] are still there," she said. "Your businesses will not go under."

Mark Martin, president of Hartford School District Jt. 1's School Board, emphasized the city's need for development "to sustain the community.

"That Wal-Mart is a good corporate citizen is undeniable," he said.

But a steady stream of Wal-Mart opponents – and concurrent applause – followed the supporters' comments.

Marilyn Raschka said 40 percent of local businesses in Rhineland had been "killed" by the Supercenter there.

She criticized the council for not requiring an economic study to measure pros and cons of a Hartford Supercenter. "That's common sense," she said.

Raschka said she had 1,000 signatures from residents opposing Wal-Mart.

"I do think all of you need to do more homework on this subject," she said. Jeffrey

Gonyo, a town of Polk resident representing the Highway J Citizens Group, stressed the potential for excessive traffic, environmental damage and harm to local businesses.

"Do we really want downtown Hartford to become a ghost town, lined with numerous empty storefronts?" he asked.

"This is the wrong project at the wrong time in the wrong place," said James Algiers, citing potential traffic problems.

"It'll change Hartford forever," said Terry Lutz. "It'll never be the same, and once it's there, you can't get rid of it.

"Are we going to sell out the city for \$92,000?" he asked.

Common Council candidate David Ziemer said he's discussed the Supercenter with some of his fellow downtown business owners.

"I have not heard one positive comment from any of them," he said.

Paul Zimmer said the Beaver Dam Supercenter hasn't created the number of full-time jobs expected.

"You can put a tuxedo on an elephant, but it's still an elephant," he said.

"I don't envy you," Scott Lopas, a persistent Wal-Mart opponent, told the council. "It's an important decision. But we really need to take a second look at this, before it's too late."

Responding to a question from Ald. Kathleen Isleb, Drew said the \$92,000 figure represented only the city's share of Supercenter revenue, without counting the school districts.

"The total portion would be about three times that," Drew said.

Addressing traffic concerns, Ald. Wayne Rusniak cited Paradise Road in West Bend, which features a Home Depot, Menards, various restaurants and strip malls.

"That traffic mess is being managed," Rusniak said.

Ald. Jacki Lokken emphasized the council has studied all issues surrounding the proposed development thoroughly.

"This has been in planning for two years," Lokken said. "We're not rushing through this."

Lokken also said many residents have told her they favor the development.

"You guys are only a small percentage of the people who voted for us," she said.

Ald. James Core said retail outlets and other developments are inevitable as a community grows. "It's reality," he said.

But Ald. Dennis Hegy expressed some concern about the Supercenter.

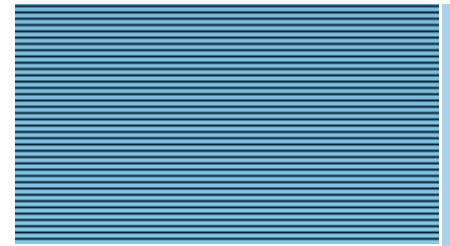
"Do we need this development in Hartford?" he asked. "That's one of the issues I'm still

struggling with.”

Ald. Wayne Garza pointed out that the development would be surrounded by “three sides of waterway.

“That just doesn’t make sense,” he said.

Garza and Hegy voted against both resolutions.



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