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4. Wal-mart, Wal-mart, Wal-mart

On Thursday afternoon all documents requested by the Hometown Express News organization were forwarded to that company, as well as all other media outlets which typically report on the City of Hartford. (The City does not play favorites among the news media.) These documents (and accompanying site plans) should give the media a clear picture of the status of the Wal-mart negotiations and the scope of the Wal-mart project.

I have advised all City employees that they are to refrain from making any comments to the media concerning the Wal-mart project. Despite the issuance of these documents, the City continues to negotiate with Wal-mart over key provisions of the proposed development, and these negotiations must be handled confidentially. Nothing in the open records request alters that understanding between the negotiating parties. If I am contacted by the media, I will respond that the documents made public on Thursday constitute all the City expects to say on the topic at this time. We continue to work with Wal-mart representatives on issues affecting the proposed development, and further information will be made public as soon as possible. When the company is prepared to bring its proposal to the Planning Commission, that fact will be noted in the Commission Agenda.

The public often fails to understand that economic development is not - and cannot be - conducted in a goldfish bowl. This is not because the governmental unit wants it this way (although we are often advantaged by this approach), but rather because private parties insist on it. I have never participated in any form of economic development meeting (including residential, commercial, and industrial) wherein the private developer did not either insist upon or take for granted that the City would maintain confidentiality. Private developers do this for a variety of reasons, and every municipality takes steps to protect this trust. (We worked privately with the owners of the Gruenhagen site for more than 4 years before any public statements were made. Apparently that project was not as newsworthy as a possible Wal-mart Superstore.) We worked for six months on the new API project before Mr. Garcia felt

comfortable in making the project public. And the HADC went to the extreme of communicating on the Glen Hepfner project by spelling the names of the principals backward to preserve confidentiality. Private business simply isn't comfortable negotiating deals in front of the press. They do not do this when negotiating among each other, and they are even more afraid of premature public exposure by local government. I asked Gary Wendorff how he would have felt if the press were involved at every step of the negotiations surrounding the new Sno-Way Building, and he replied that he would not have liked that at all. I have even had developers tell me they would not deal with the City if their confidentiality could not be guaranteed.

This is nothing to be ashamed of. It is simply the way in which economic development is conducted in the 21st Century. I have heard it said that the City is "conspiring" with Wal-mart, which is absurd. This implies that there is something wrong with building a Wal-mart in Hartford, which is equally absurd. This City treats all developers and development proposals equally (including Gentlemen's Clubs), and I think our record on economic development speaks for itself.

Weekly
Confidential
Memo
~~from City Admin~~
to elected
officials dated
04/23/04

for
City of Hartford

City of Hartford, WI