

Hartford CRG: Don't discipline city officials

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HARTFORD — An official of the Hartford Citizens for Responsible Government said he doesn't believe Mayor Scott Henke or the Hartford Common Council should take any form of disciplinary action against City Administrator Gary Koppelberger or City Planner Justin Drew because of their actions associated with the Wal-Mart project in late 2003.

Ray VonGunten said he believes Henke and council, once notified by Koppelberger in November 2003 that Wal-Mart was interested in building a store in Hartford, should have either conducted town hall-type meetings to get the word out or moved to have a non-binding advisory referendum to gauge how the community would react to such a project.

According to information provided by the HCRG, Koppelberger's weekly memo dated Nov. 27, 2003 sent to Henke and alderpersons told them that a private resident, Gary Doll, had been approached by a "big box" retailer interested in buying land owned by Doll on West Sumner Street.

In that same memo, Koppelberger said he advised Wal-Mart not to bring forward an annexation petition regarding the land, which at the time was in the town of Hartford, because it would make the project a "political football" for the upcoming 2004 spring election. That election featured a mayoral race between Henke and challenger Sean Hampe and incumbent Alderperson Murlin Bernd and Planning Commissioner Wayne Rusniak.

The memo also advised Henke and the council that Drew had discussed zoning-related issues with members of Wal-Mart's surveying and engineering consultants.

"He (Koppelberger) shouldn't be involved in political issues, that's up to the mayor and council to decide," VonGunten said this week. "They should have present-

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ed it to the people at that time and a lot of the subsequent controversy (recall elections and a possible appeal of Wal-Mart's final site plan) could have been avoided. They could have done a great sales job if they just would have gone to the citizens sooner with what was happening."

Henke said the memo from Koppelberger advising the mayor and alderpersons about potential issues and other items is a regular process of communication between the city's day-to-day operations manager and its elected officials.

"You have to remember that at that time, it was a speculative discussion between a private land owner and a company," Henke said.

"There are a number of speculative inquiries every day about the availability of land in Hartford for various things.

Sometimes they come to fruition and sometimes they don't. That is why we have a regulatory process that requires a company or land owner to follow certain steps," he said.

"You also have to remember that at that time, it was a negotiation between a private citizen and land owner with a company. If we called for town hall meetings every time something like this is happening, we'd be doing it two or three times a week," said Henke.

"It's only speculative until someone gets involved in the regulatory process, as Wal-Mart finally did, and goes through the public hearings before the planning commission and council that are required. We had plenty of hearings and there was plenty of opportunities for residents to learn about the plan and to give their input on it."