

The Capital

Top Stories

Battling Wal-Mart has become a Maryland tradition

By ELIZABETH LEIS, Staff Writer

For a hint of what might happen in Crofton, those on both sides of the rancorous debate over a proposed Wal-Mart have only to look around Maryland.

At least three times in the past 15 years, bitter fights over proposed Wal-Marts have ignited, dividing neighbors, dragging on for years and -- in some cases -- providing examples of how to win.

Wal-Mart spokesman Rhoda Washington described much of the opposition to the firm as stemming from "special interest groups."

"Being a very large company is an easy target," she said.

But those familiar with the history of Wal-Mart fights in Maryland say it's more than that.

Activists argue their passion stems from Wal-Mart's business practices, the footprint the stores leave on the environment, the traffic and large parking lots, and the impact on small businesses.

State lawmakers passed legislation last year aimed squarely at Wal-Mart's employee health care policies, saying the company needed to offer benefits similar to other major employers in the state.

Bill Ingersoll, Chestertown town manager for more than 20 years, said the fight over Wal-Mart in his community in the mid-1990s was about the future of the sleepy city on the rural Upper Eastern Shore.

"It was the earliest battle for preservation and the life we think we had," he said.

"I can't tell you how many phone calls I've gotten over the years, asking 'how did Chestertown do that?' "

Some of the same themes were echoed later on Kent Island and more recently in Dunkirk, with different results.

Not all of Maryland's roughly 30 Wal-Marts have generated such heat.

When Wal-Mart built two locations in Glen Burnie in the late 1980s, the first to open got thousands of applications for 300 jobs. With five locations, including a stand-alone Sam's



By J. Henson -- *The Capital*
Crofton residents protest proposed Wal-Mart along Route 3

Club in Parole, the chain is a major county employer.

And Crofton residents opposed to Wal-Mart based on its past image should take note that the company says it has learned lessons from the fights.

Al Norman, who runs the Web site www.sprawl-busters.com and is the author of a handful of books on Wal-Mart, said the company is unlikely to try the blunt approaches to development that were seen in places like Chestertown.

"I don't think the company will continue to be so blatant," he said. "They did back down."

Wal-Mart itself says it now tries to reach out to local businesses, and caters individual stores to surrounding communities. The Crofton store will be upscale, with a red and white facade that makes it look more like the elite community, less like its traditional battleship blue and gray.

"As a practice, we work closely with the local planning departments, members of the planning commission or committee and elected officials on projects that are aesthetically pleasing to the community," Ms. Washington said.

"We simply want to offer consumers a choice in retail for quality goods."

Chestertown

It's easy to imagine that Annapolis once looked like Chestertown.

There's the serene Chester River, downtown merchants and people walking around and shopping. But there's no construction noise or traffic rumble - only the sounds of children and ducks.

When Wal-Mart announced plans to build a 107,000-square-foot store on Route 213 in the early 1990s, the community split. The rift is still there a decade later, to the point that many people don't like talking about it anymore.

Bob Ramsey, president of the Downtown Chestertown Association, said many residents wanted the convenience of a Wal-Mart while business owners were worried about the impact. Others were concerned that a Wal-Mart on the main road into town would generate so much traffic it would hurt the quality of life - making it much more like Annapolis.

"That area over there, I have a perception that it's all congestion over there anyway, unlike in Kent County," Mr. Ramsey said.

The Coalition for the Preservation of Chestertown was formed and hired local attorney Phil Hoon. Much of the dispute had to do with size, with Mr. Hoon offering to drop the group's opposition if Wal-Mart would cut its plans in half.

"Our largest store is 38,000 square feet - Rose's Department store," he said. "Wal-Mart wanted approval for a store three times that large, with room for expansion."

The Kent County planning commission approved the store plan in 1993, and the coalition appealed that decision to the courts. Mr. Hoon argued that the store did not fit in with the

1984 comprehensive plan, while Wal-Mart argued that the plans did not specify a size limit on stores.

Eventually, the Court of Special Appeals said the county had to abide by the comprehensive plan, a defeat for Wal-Mart's proposal. The company appealed, but in late 2002 the courts upheld the decision and the retailer finally gave up.

Despite the victory over Wal-Mart, though, Chestertown has been "discovered." Real estate developments are blossoming on the shore, and weekenders can fill town streets as they drive through for a peep at the quaint scenery.

The traffic that many feared is growing even without Wal-Mart.

"People can't get through town the way they used to," Mr. Ingersoll said.

Kent Island

The proposal to put a Wal-Mart just across the Bay Bridge on Kent Island boiled down to residents putting their money where their mouths were.

In 1999, Wal-Mart proposed building a shopping center, a 123-room hotel and a conference center on a site that would have made the complex the first thing people saw as they crossed the Chesapeake Bay.

Originally, commissioners signed off on the project, but then denied sewer approval because of the limited capacity. Wal-Mart sued.

After the county lost in Circuit Court, the Court of Special Appeals found in favor of the county in 2002, saying it had the right to choose who got sewer access.

Because the county is planning on opening another sewer treatment plant that will be online in 2007, a new slate of commissioners knew Wal-Mart could come back. Unlike in Chestertown, where the split over the Wal-Mart was 50-50, there was little community support for a Wal-Mart on the site.

County officials turned to the Federal Aviation Administration to help buy the Wal-Mart site for around \$7 million. The county will use the 24 acres to extend the Bay Bridge Airport.

"We didn't want it, we bought - that's the reality of it," said Steve Cohoon, Queen Anne's deputy director of planning and zoning. "In land use, if you don't want someone next to you, you buy their property. We put our money where our mouth is."

Stan Ruddle of Stevensville, founder of the grassroots group Up Against the Wal, said traffic, public safety, the environment and the overall location were key issues. While the sewer denial was legitimate, he said public pressure had an impact.

"Keep throwing stuff on the wall to see what sticks," he said as advice. "We took help from whoever would give it to us. The unions were helpful. ... We would be willing to help Crofton."

Mr. Cohoon said after the court battle over the Wal-Mart, the county commissioners had

a discussion about big box legislation, ultimately adopting a law in 2004 that limits the stores to 65,000 square feet.

County Commissioner Gene M. Ransom III said it took just under six years to settle everything. He advised anyone opposed to a Wal-Mart to settle in for the long haul.

Raising money was always the hardest part. For officials, there also are political ramifications of not limiting growth if that's what constituents want.

"You can win these things," Mr. Ransom said. "Hold your elected officials accountable. Vote them out if they're not doing the right thing. This issue crosses party lines."

Dunkirk

In Dunkirk, Wal-Mart overcame opposition and won approval of a compromise store, smaller than the company originally wanted but more than some opponents liked.

Both sides consider the store a victory.

"At this point in time, I think the regulations are satisfactory," said Greg Bowen, the director of the Department of Planning and Zoning. "We're not trying to discourage large retail stores, but they should go where the comprehensive plan calls for them to go."

The retailer originally planned a 150,000-square-foot store. But under pressure from groups like the Calvert Neighbors for Sensible Growth, the county passed a 75,000-square-foot limit.

Then Wal-Mart found a loophole - there was nothing that said it couldn't build two side-by-side stores. Combined, those stores would have been close to 100,000 square feet.

The company backed down last year and resubmitted plans for a 74,998-square-foot store, which Ms. Washington, the Wal-Mart spokesman, said will likely be completed this fall.

"Every day that the Dunkirk store isn't open, it's losing money," said Cornelia Poudrier of Owings, a founder of the Calvert Neighbors for Sensible Growth. "They finally withdrew their plan."

Calvert County has another Wal-Mart in Prince Frederick, where the size limit is 120,000 square feet. That store, in a major town center, is 90,000 square feet.

But in Dunkirk, the common concerns of traffic and the larger impact on the community were again concerns.

Ms. Poudrier said the key to success was building public sentiment through the formation of a group.

"Wal-Mart tried every which way they could to get around this," she said. "Get as many people as you can. Get them to e-mail and to write."

Crofton

Opponents of the Wal-Mart in Crofton say it will damage the woods off of Route 3 and

clog the highway.

But most acknowledge a deeper issue - Wal-Mart doesn't fit into many people's vision of Crofton.

Property owner William Berkshire said he's tried to address this with the company, encouraging the store to fit in with the landscape. He has a purchase agreement for the land, which is on the west side of Route 3 south of Cronson Boulevard.

The reaction to Wal-Mart is in contrast to generally positive reaction to news that Wegmans, a highly popular New York grocery chain, plans to open a store just a few miles away at the Village at Waugh Chapel.

Ms. Washington, the Wal-Mart spokesman, said store managers will be able to afford to live in Crofton, and points to the Marshall's at the Village of Waugh Chapel as proof that there are already some discount stores in the area.

The Crofton Wal-Mart will have upscale clothing lines, and she points to the success of stores in Plano, Texas, and Los Angeles that show Wal-Mart isn't just for small rural towns.

"We're all over the world. We can provide the right inventory," she said. "Our goal is to make certain that we become a part of each community. ... Another demonstration is through merchandise. The Crofton community should expect to see items that reflect its quality of life."

That said, Wal-Mart shoppers do not necessarily go to their community store.

"There is a high percentage of those who shop in Bowie who are from Clinton, a higher percentage of those in the Glen Burnie stores are from Bowie, a high percentage of Bowie residents shop in Laurel or Hanover," she said.

That's what worries people like Sharon Puckett, who until recently was on the Crofton Civic Association's board of directors.

"My main concern is traffic, safety, environmental issues," she said. "We don't want a big gray tank."

"I think it's about it being a regional draw," Ms. Puckett said. "I'm hoping we're not a bunch of bigots and snobs."

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