



What's the Problem?

## *The Donella Meadows Archive*

# How to Fight Superstore Sprawl

The Wal-Mart battle around here has simmered down for awhile. The planning board turned down the company's application on the grounds that the store (plus another proposed discount store) would bring at peak shopping times 1300 more cars an hour to an already jammed area. Expanding access roads to handle that traffic would cost 3-4 million dollars, of which Wal-Mart's impact fees and taxes would have paid only a fraction. Other taxpayers were not enthused about subsidizing the arrival of one huge enterprise.

There are lawsuits pending, of course.

While the planning board was wrestling with the proposal, I wrote two anti-superstore columns, which took on a life of their own. People sent them to friends in other towns that had Wal-Mart's coming. I started getting phone calls from Vermont, New York, Indiana, Maine. It was a busy year for Wal-Mart and me. The company was apparently trying to build stores roughly every 20 miles over the entire nation. Callers from all over were asking me, what will this monster store do to us? Can we do anything to stop it, or to guide it toward helping, rather than hurting, our community?

I referred the callers to "Sprawl Central," the National Trust for Historic Preservation in Washington DC, which has become a citizens' clearinghouse for information about rampant commercial growth. The Trust's interest in this issue comes not from antipathy to Wal-Mart or any other particular company, but from what mall sprawl in general does to communities. The Trust likes to quote a letter written by William Faulkner in 1947 to protest the destruction of a historic courthouse in Oxford, Mississippi: "It was tougher than war, tougher than the Yankee Brigadier Chalmers and his artillery.... But it wasn't tougher than the ringing of a cash register bell. It had to go ... so that a sprawling octopus covering the country ... can dispense in cut-rate bargain lots, bananas and toilet paper. They call this progress. But they don't say where it's going; also there are some of us who would like the chance to say whether or not we want the ride."

The Trust has been sending citizen activists a packet of articles about the impacts of major mall development. It contains such facts as these:

In Iowa the average Wal-Mart increases area sales by \$9 million a year. But the Wal-Mart itself grosses \$20 million a year, which means it takes \$11 million of sales from existing stores.

In Hagerstown, Maryland, after a 570,000-square-foot mall opened, downtown sales dropped by 31 percent. In Plattsburgh, New York, a new mall was followed by a 60 percent drop in the value of downtown commercial property.

A Massachusetts study says that a typical discount superstore creates 140 jobs and destroys 230 higher-paying jobs.

A 156,000-square-foot store planned for St. Albans, Vermont will take 44 acres of farmland for building and parking -- an area just about equal to St. Albans' entire downtown.

In 1990 in the U.S. the equivalent of a 34,000-square-foot mall store opened every hour. But shopping centers were on average 12 percent vacant. The U.S. presently has the equivalent of 3800 empty shopping centers.

The National Trust has now packaged its information into one book, called "How Superstore Sprawl Can Harm Communities." In addition to facts about the impact of sprawl, the book contains tips for organizers, and stories of towns that have dealt successfully with superstores -- sometimes by sending them away, sometimes by redirecting them to places where the towns wanted the growth to go.

In Westford, Massachusetts, citizens gathered 5000 signatures to protest an approaching Wal-Mart. Hundreds of people showed up at planning board meetings, asking hard questions about sewage, traffic, pollution, and quality of life. "We have a beautiful, friendly little New England town here," said one organizer at a rally. "Let's keep it that way." In the face of ongoing public resistance, Wal-Mart withdrew its application to build.

The Wal-Mart decision in Greenfield, Massachusetts was a protracted struggle, involving two town-wide referenda. One key event was an independent study, which Wal-Mart agreed to pay for. The study predicted that the proposed store would turn 65 percent of competing retail space in Franklin County into vacancies; that it would reduce Greenfield's commercial property values by 33 percent; that it would create essentially no net gains in either jobs or property taxes. The citizens voted down the rezoning for the store.

Both Lawrence, Kansas, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, wrote plans and zoning laws discouraging development on the edges of town and directing it downtown. Lawrence won an impressive series of court challenges from one developer. Cambridge ended up with a thriving and beautiful new retail center to which half the customers come by foot or mass transit.

Holland, Michigan showed how a community can move from defeating sprawl it doesn't want to inviting growth it does want, in the form of a people-friendly town center. "We wanted the downtown to be a unique place where people call you by your first name and accept your check," says one Holland resident. "So we brought in small, independent businesses." "The biggest payoff," says a developer, "is the look on peoples' faces as they walk along the main street. When you have all these outlying areas, nobody feels like they belong to anything. People want to claim Holland."

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