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Big boxes of scorn heaped on Duluth Wal-Mart

Issues of class, crime are cited, but some locals tie the dispute to a fear of unstoppable growth in Gwinnett.

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It may be one of the most routine experiences in American life: heading to Wal-Mart to buy groceries, some clothes or a bike.

It's so common that the world's largest retailer expects to open a new U.S. store, on average, every other day this year.

Most open with little fanfare. Yet in some places — such as Duluth — word that the giant is coming will shake the community like little else can.

People flood City Hall. They shout. They question the chain's impact on everything from local businesses to the environment to its own employees.

In Duluth, controversy has raged since Wal-Mart unveiled plans to build a 176,305-square-foot Supercenter on Peachtree Industrial Boulevard.

People have packed meetings, carried protest signs, collected signatures and fired off angry e-mails. The City Council imposed a six-month moratorium on large-scale developments to study their impact. The man who wants to sell 27 acres to Wal-Mart, Jack Bandy, has sued Duluth and the city's Zoning Board of Appeals.

To Wal-Mart spokesman Glen Wilkins, the company's commitment to Duluth is an example of its strategy of building near customers.

To critics, the debate is tied up in a larger conversation about issues such as "quality of life" and "community." Underpinning it all is a frustration with Gwinnett County's years of seemingly unstoppable development.

"Fatigue is a big part of it," said Mark Williams, chairman of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District, a group of businesses that tax themselves to pay for community improvements.

"We've had a lot of willy-nilly development, and people are just tired of it."

Big, ugly crime magnets?

Debates about Wal-Mart seem to involve mostly local issues. Foes say the stores are big and ugly, cause traffic, threaten mom and pop stores and attract crime — all of which Wal-Mart disputes.

In almost every case, argues Charles Fishman, author of "The Wal-Mart Effect," a current of discontent with the brand itself runs just beneath the surface.

As the most dominant retailer on the planet, Wal-Mart has changed the way the world shops and given rise to watchdog groups.

It's hardly the only retailer accused of paying low wages or using questionable business tactics — charges Wal-Mart denies — but it attracts a level of scorn rarely directed at big-box retailers such as Target or Best Buy.

Why? Its size, Fishman said.

About \$10 of every \$100 spent at U.S. businesses is spent at Wal-Mart. About 127 million Americans shop there every week.

"They sell more toys than Toys 'R' Us. More jeans than Levi Strauss. More groceries than anyone in the world. More guns. More cigarettes. More eyeliner," Fishman said. "Whatever business you're in, you wake up thinking about Wal-Mart."

Opponents get organized

You won't hear much talk about the global economy from members of Smart Growth Gwinnett, a group that is fighting the proposed Wal-Mart.

Their concerns are local. Many of them live near the proposed store, about five miles from an existing Wal-Mart on Pleasant Hill Road.

"We realized ... that we needed to put some organization behind us," said Len Boyer, the group's vice chairman. "We said, 'We can't just be a bunch of people yelling 'No Wal-Mart!' We wanted to see what people out there had done similarly.'"

They learned about grass-roots strategies and started collecting signatures and raising money. Soon people in red T-shirts picketed City Hall and packed meetings about the project.

They told anyone who would listen that Peachtree Industrial Boulevard isn't industrial at all. In fact, they counted about 1,000 upscale homes within three miles of the site.

"This isn't about Wal-Mart per se," Boyer said. "This is about big-box development. ... We're a proponent of smart growth that's consistent with the look and feel of Duluth."

The site of the proposed Wal-Mart is zoned for such a commercial development, so opponents have focused on otherwise mundane issues.

In August, for example, a city planner agreed to Wal-Mart's request to deviate from building codes related to the pitch of the store's roof, material for exterior walls and landscaping. Smart Growth Gwinnett appealed the decision to the Duluth Zoning Board of Appeals — and won.

Yet others in Duluth expect a store on the land.

"It may as well be something that I shop at," said Ed Livingston, who lives nearby. "If it's not going to be Wal-Mart, it will be something else."

Store has supporters

Controversy doesn't always dog Wal-Mart.

"If I could, I would have it in my backyard," said Joyce Price, who drives a county school bus and shops weekly at the Wal-Mart on Plesant Hill Road.

Supporters tend not to crowd into public meetings, company spokesman Wilkins said, but many have told him they would welcome a new Wal-Mart in Duluth.

In Dacula, the City Council approved plans for a Supercenter with little fanfare. What's different there?

"Personally, I think it is a class issue," said Tim Sullivan, a Buford real estate agent who tracks land-use issues in northeastern Gwinnett. "There are more higher-priced homes in Duluth than in Dacula. I believe most folks assume the Wal-Mart customer is a bargain hunter because they are poor."

Issues of class often surface in the Wal-Mart debate.

A University of California at Berkeley study found that California Wal-Mart workers used more public assistance than employees of other large retailers. A University of Missouri study found that the company's presence cost jobs at nearby retail and wholesale companies.

Wilkins said his company is unfairly singled out for all kinds of misdeeds and is seldom lauded for all it gives back to communities. He's particularly irked by the complaint that Wal-Mart drives mom and pop stores out of business.

"Show me where a business has failed because of Wal-Mart," Wilkins said. "If there's so many of them, it shouldn't be so hard for people to come up with them. I see new businesses

popping up next to Wal-Mart, not closing."

Landowner's lawsuits

At the moment, the proposed store is in limbo.

Bandy, the landowner, has sued Duluth's mayor and City Council as well as its Zoning Board of Appeals. The first suit seeks to invalidate the moratorium on large-scale buildings. The second argues that the appeals board erred in siding against Wal-Mart in three decisions related to building-design issues.

In the end, author Fishman predicted, the store "will do what it has to do" to open. But he noted that

citizens' groups elsewhere have influenced store designs by working with Wal-Mart.

"If I had people from Smart Growth Gwinnett ask me to sit down and discuss this project again, and ensure we would have a dialogue," Wilkins said, "I would do it in a minute."

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