

# DAILY NEWS

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## ON THE CITY

By ERROL LOUIS

# Boxes come in many sizes

*Some stores are bad neighbors, others can fit right in*

**P**lans to build a new BJ's Wholesale Club in the Bronx are about to heat up a simmering citywide battle over so-called big-box stores. The fact that BJ's has a history of shabby labor practices shouldn't spoil New York's increasing acceptance of megastores and the low prices they bring.

Tomorrow night, members of Community Board 10 are scheduled to hear the pros and cons of allowing BJ's to set up a store near the Whitestone Cinema. It's early in the process, but some opponents already say they're concerned that the store will create traffic congestion.

The problem with this complaint is that the proposed site is next to the Bruckner interchange, a gigantic cloverleaf built in the 1970s that connects the Hutchinson River Parkway with the Bruckner, Cross Bronx, and Throgs Neck expressways. Few places in the region have better connections to so many highways, which is probably why BJ's selected the site. Robert Moses, the late master planner, messed up a lot of things, but the interchange isn't one of them.

A more important issue in whether this big box should be in the Bronx is BJ's reputation for mistreating workers. In late July, Local 1500 of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union charged BJ's with union-busting tactics at a store in East New York, Brooklyn.

Shortly before a union representation election was scheduled to be held, two BJ's employees

were arrested for shoplifting. They happened to be members of a pro-union committee, which Local 1500 says isn't a coincidence.

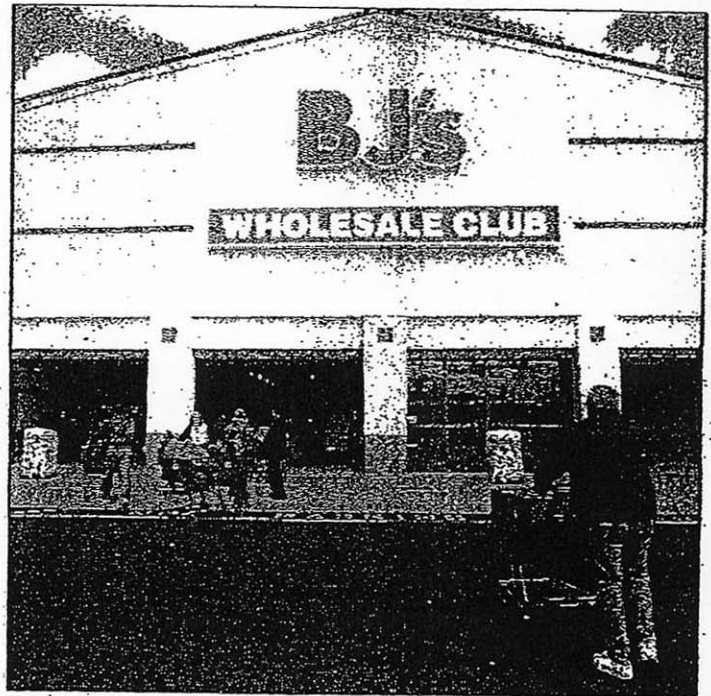
The two employees were handcuffed and arrested in full view of their co-workers, which UFCW organizer Pat Purcell says was an act of intimidation based on trumped-up charges. If so, the tactic worked: When the vote was taken a few weeks later, the union lost by 141 to 56.

"They're anti-union to the bone," says Purcell.

It might be easy to dismiss Local 1500's complaint as a matter of sour grapes, but some workers in BJ's 151 stores have been mistreated by the company. In July, in a deal with the federal Department of Labor, the company paid \$320,000 in overtime owed to 233 workers. It seems BJ's was in the habit of giving relatively low-level employees the title "club personnel manager," and then refusing to pay them overtime. According to the Labor Department, the workers were earning \$14.93 an hour on average, but putting in five hours of overtime every week. A BJ's spokeswoman declined to comment on the union's charges.

Forcing overtime out of "managers" who make \$31,000 a year is crummy behavior, and the treatment of the Brooklyn workers, which remains under investigation, is troubling. But it won't affect whether the proposed BJ's in the Bronx will be approved.

"Can you deny a project because they're not good citizens of the community? No," said Purcell.



BILL TURNBULL/DAILY NEWS

The BJ's big box that opened recently in College Point, Queens.

One of the worst effects of controversial players like BJ's is to make it seem as if all big boxes are bad for neighborhoods. In reality, some are great, some awful, and most fall somewhere in between.

Ikea, the Swedish furniture company, for instance, offers a lush package of benefits to its employees, including full medical and dental insurance for all em-

ployees who work at least 20 hours a week, as well as tuition assistance.

As it moves closer to opening its first New York City location — a proposed superstore in Red Hook, Brooklyn — Ikea, not BJ's, should be viewed as the model for how New York can have big boxes without causing big problems.

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