

NEW YORK

Big-Boxed Out

Richard Lipsky, retail insurgent, helped drive Wal-Mart out of Queens. How does he turn back the tide of shopping gigantism?

RICHARD LIPSKY HAS ABSOLUTELY no desire to buy paper towels in bulk at some megamart. And he doesn't want New Yorkers to, either. The lobbyist for the Neighborhood Retail Alliance—a coalition of small supermarkets, Korean delis, and bodegas—his speciality is blocking big-box superstores from setting up shop in the city. So far, he's defeated three Costcos and a BJ's, and last week, he crushed Vornado Realty Trust's plans for a Wal-Mart in Queens, simply by fomenting enough of a fuss. Greg Sargent spoke with Lipsky.

Surely Wal-Mart hasn't given up on New York that easy. Vornado pulled the plug without a fight. It was a suicide before the execution. I don't think we've seen the real Wal-Mart yet. They have resources, intelligence, and they'll learn the landscape. Wal-Mart is like the Death Star—you can wipe them out, but they'll be back. **How do you mobilize for a counterattack?** You have to identify the little mayors, the caretakers of localized customs and traditions who are aggressively protective of their neighborhoods. Your message can't be just about jobs. That gets labor on your side, but the key is combining a left-wing populist message with a conservative populist one about neighborhood character. [That's] the music that makes the elected officials want to dance. **But don't the big boxes bring jobs to neighborhoods?** They pay much less than the ones they displace by driving out new immigrant supermarkets and smaller chains like C-Town, which are unionized. **New York already has lots of national chains. And they are cheap. Isn't this a losing battle?** We still have 180,000 mom-and-pop retailers in the city. In the seventies, a lot of chains fled like hell from urban blight, leaving neighborhood retail strips in shambles. Into the vacuum came waves of Dominicans, Koreans, Chinese. The chains and big-box stores wouldn't be making a move on New York if these little guys hadn't made the terrain safe for them. **Aren't you just making money telling these smaller businesses that they should fear Wal-Mart and pay you to defeat it?** They don't need me to be afraid of Wal-Mart. **You live in Rockland County, land of shopping plazas. You never hit a Supercenter?** The biggest store I shop at is the local C-Town. You can check my credit-card receipts.

