

DAILY NEWS

ON BIG BOXES By ERROL LOUIS

Labor practices should count for something



Tomorrow, the City Council is scheduled to hang a “not welcome” sign out for Wal-Mart, the nation’s largest retailer, which is trying to secure its first New York City site in Rego Park, Queens. But the slap at Wal-Mart will be in the form of a vote to block a completely different megastore, BJ’s Wholesale Club, from opening a location in the Bronx.

BJ’s was targeted by a collection of unions and community groups that believes the benefits of access to cheap goods is outweighed by the harm caused by

companies that provide low salaries and scant benefits.

“We saw BJ’s, a company modeled after the Wal-Mart example, as a test case for developing a coalition to oppose the world’s largest — and nonunion — retailer,” said Richard Lipsky, a lobbyist for the anti-Wal-Mart groups.

Council members have only one real tool to block a big-box store: holding up zoning approvals on the grounds that a facility will cause or contribute to traffic or environmental problems. So politicians raise these issues even if the real reason for opposi-

tion has nothing to do with traffic or environmental concerns.

Last week, the Council’s Land Use Committee voted down the proposed BJ’s on the grounds that the store would bring extra traffic to the area. But the proposed site was under a cloverleaf that joins the Hutchinson River Parkway and the Cross Bronx, Bruckner and Throg’s Neck expressways. It could almost certainly handle additional cars traveling to the store.

Democratic Councilwoman Madeline Provenzano of the Bronx, who wanted the BJ’s built

in her district, explained this to her fellow Council members. “It’s the perfect location. There are no homes nearby, there’s no elementary schools, no churches, no playgrounds, no hospitals,” she said at the hearing. “All of this stuff is just a great big smoke screen because we all know that the bottom line is the union.”

To be more precise, the bottom line is BJ’s and Wal-Mart’s labor practices. Both companies work actively to keep unions out, and both have been sued for allegedly cheating workers out of over-

time pay.

Under an agreement with the government, BJ’s recently paid \$320,000 in back wages to 233 employees. Wal-Mart has been charged with underpaying more than 1 million female employees in what is the largest job-discrimination suit in American history.

These and other practices need to be aired fully before the next big-box store application arrives. That way, Council members can quit pretending to talk about traffic and smog and get to the real issue, workers’ rights.

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