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Neighborhood conundrum

Residents divided as Wal-Mart pursues plans for urban site;
Backers say area needs project; critics fear crime, traffic

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The lure of low prices has collided head-on with fears of traffic-choked streets as some Dallas residents consider whether a proposed Wal-Mart would be a boon or a blight for their neighborhoods.

Wal-Mart wants to build a 220,000-square-foot Supercenter in the heart of Dallas - on Mockingbird Lane between Inwood Road and Lemmon Avenue. Although the retail giant has traditionally built stores on sprawling suburban sites, this would be a Wal-Mart with an urban twist.

The company has promised a "one-of-a-kind design" that would feature an elevated store with parking below the retail area. Earth tones would replace the company's signature blue.

Preliminary plans have drawn national notice in the retail industry. But some residents from surrounding areas say their neighborhood isn't suited for this new urban concept. They argue that shoehorning a full-size Supercenter - a store the size of 4 1/2 football fields - into a lot half the size of most Wal-Mart sites will bring noise, crime and traffic gridlock to an already congested area.

"This is really a massive use of the land," said Pat White, co-chair of the Love Field Citizens Action Committee. "It's like trying to squeeze a size-12 foot into a size-6 shoe."

A Syms outlet store now sits on part of the 11-acre site, but the proposed two-story Supercenter would be more than 4 1/2 times the size of the Syms building and more than twice the size of a nearby Home Depot. The Wal-Mart would be open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Daphne Davis Moore, Wal-Mart's community affairs manager, said the combination discount center and grocery store "is a very efficient use of the land that's available."

Transforming the site between Dallas Love Field and the Park Cities into a Supercenter requires a zoning change, and Wal-Mart and its opponents are scheduled to make their cases before the Plan Commission on Thursday afternoon.

Although the commission is not the final authority on this issue - the City Council is - both sides already have launched campaigns worthy of a political race. Wal-Mart's consultants have a Web site (www.walmartlovefield.com) up and running, and they have sent nearby residents a mailing promising to build a store "that is an integral part of the community we serve."

The neighborhood leaders who are opposed to the store are not as well-funded, but many are battle-tested after working with city leaders to develop a Love Field master plan.

"We haven't gotten answers to a lot of big questions," said Joyce Lockley, a resident of the North Park/Love Field neighborhood. "Wal-Mart readily addressed some of the little things we asked for, but those aren't our major concerns."

Other residents from the same neighborhoods support building a Wal-Mart, but they have not been as organized - or as vocal.

'We were ecstatic'

Pam Green, whose house sits across the street from the site, said she would be thrilled to have a supermarket and a discount center nearby. She drives more than eight miles to a Wal-Mart near Midway Road and LBJ Freeway.

"We wanted a grocery store there, but this is even better," Mrs. Green said. "We were ecstatic when we found out."

The city's planning and development staff has recommended denying Wal-Mart's request for a zoning change.

Neva Dean, the city's chief planner, said concerns about the Supercenter's impact on nearby residential areas were a primary factor in the recommendation.

Ms. Dean said modifications that address noise and traffic issues could make Wal-Mart's proposal more compatible with the area.

"But the plan as they've presented it is not something we could support," she said.

The city staff estimates that the store will result in an additional 11,000 vehicle trips a day in the area.

Nancy Hart, a resident of nearby Bordeaux Village, said Mockingbird Lane is strained by Love Field traffic and could not accommodate that many more cars. She and her neighbors can quickly tick off several alternative routes that Wal-Mart customers might take if they cut through surrounding neighborhoods.

"There's no buffer for the neighborhoods," she said.

James Hall, who has worked on the project as an engineering consultant with the firm Kimley-Horn, said Wal-Mart plans to add features, including deceleration lanes and left-turn lanes, designed to ease the flow of traffic on nearby streets. Wal-Mart also plans to have Kimley-Horn conduct a traffic study after construction is complete and help neighbors seek remedies to problems with cut-through traffic, he said.

"We have looked at traffic from the beginning," Mr. Hall said. "With our improvements, the project will not create a significant increase in traffic."

A memo from the Northwest Operations Division of the Dallas Police Department suggests that the proposed Wal-Mart would dramatically increase the workload for officers in the area, resulting in longer police response times in the surrounding neighborhoods.

But a subsequent memo from the Police Department emphasized that the department "has no official position" on the proposed project.

Ms. Moore said that crime has not been a significant problem at other stores and that the company would take precautions to ensure customers' and neighbors' safety.

Neil Emmons, the plan commissioner whose district includes the Wal-Mart site, said he has not decided how he will vote. But he said he does not think the volume of traffic the project would bring could be easily mitigated.

"I always keep my mind open until the public hearing when I can hear both sides," he said. "But I've received numerous phone calls and volumes of mail from constituents opposed to this project."

Residents surveyed

Wal-Mart has sent a survey to nearby residents, seeking their opinions about the project. Ms. Moore said that the response has been positive and that meetings with neighborhoods have resulted in changes that address some of the issues raised by residents.

"I really don't think the opposition speaks for the public at large," she said. "Our proposal is going to make a lot of people happy."

Lisa Boyd, who lives in the West Highland Park neighborhood, agreed. She said she looks forward to the convenience of having a Supercenter nearby. She said an urban Wal-Mart is a significant upgrade from the existing Syms store.

"I think that anything is better than what's there now," Ms. Boyd said. "This is going to be more upscale than a normal suburban Wal-Mart."

Opponents, though, are unconvinced.

A paint job and some trees won't change the essence of the project or the problems that a store this size would bring, said Ronald Holman, a resident of the Greenway Parks neighborhood.

"These are nothing more than cosmetic changes," he said. "You put red lipstick on a pig, it's still a pig."

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