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Buying into more crime? That's what opponents of big-box stores say. Police and justices agree, but note that any growth brings problems.

Gil Smart

When Wal-Mart came to town, Brad Ortenzi's job got tougher.

Ortenzi is an Ephrata Township police detective, and ever since the 203,000-square-foot "superstore" at the corner of routes 222 and 322 opened in 1999, he and other officers have spent an inordinate amount of time responding to crimes, most of them small, at the big box.

"It has been a drastic increase," said Ortenzi. "Bad checks, use of stolen credit cards. ... During a busy week, we'll have three to five retail theft arrests, and with each arrest, that ties up an officer who has to go down, take a person into custody" and follow up with paperwork and possibly a court appearance.

"It's a big hassle."

And to a degree, it validates something superstore opponents have been saying for years.

Last week it was reported that Wal-Mart wants to build yet another store in Lancaster County, this time in Rapho Township. Like virtually every other super-store plan here, it is likely to run into opposition from residents who claim that, among other things, it will generate crime.

There is something to that claim; local law enforcement officials confirm that a new big box store is guaranteed to generate more calls to police, more paperwork, more arrests.

But it's not as if superstores are somehow unique in requiring police attention. Rather, any new construction, be it an upscale residential neighborhood or huge strip mall, places an additional burden on law enforcement.

Busy retailers tend to generate the most calls, but "superstores" don't necessarily generate more than strip malls; it depends on a variety of factors, from the hours a store is open to the clientele it serves.

"You could make this argument about anything that is built," said East Lampeter Township police Chief Dale Jerchau. "We get a lot of calls to Wal-Mart, but we get a

lot of calls to Rockvale Square (Outlets), too.

"It's not like other places aren't a drain on our resources."

Jerchau, interviewed late last week, was angry that he has been portrayed as a "friend" of superstores by some in East Lampeter who are fighting plans to build a Target store near the intersection of Witmer Road and Route 30.

Primarily, opponents are concerned about how traffic from the big box would affect lightly traveled Witmer Road, but they have seized on the issue of crime as another reason to keep Target out, and were backed up in that assertion by East Lampeter District Justice Ronald Savage, who reported last month that the Wal-Mart in East Lampeter places an "astronomical" burden on his staff, with 343 cases coming from that store last year alone.

Further big box developments in the community, some say, will strain law enforcement resources even further.

But Jerchau has pointed out that development issues are decided by a municipality's elected and appointed officials, which don't include law enforcement. For that, he said, he's been pilloried.

"I try desperately not to get in the middle of these things, but these people are out in left field with a catcher's mitt on," said the chief. "It is the job of the cops to provide services regardless of what's there."

And any large retail center, he said, is going to generate crime. Other law enforcement officials back him up.

A staffer in the office of District Justice Mary Sponaugle, which handles cases from Park City Center, estimated that up to 30 percent of the caseload comes from the mall.

Most incidents at large retail properties consist of retail theft, bad checks, credit card fraud or parking tickets. "Any retail property is going to have problems like that," said the staffer, who declined to give her name.

Since the Red Rose Commons "power center," featuring a number of big box stores, was constructed in the late 1990s, Lancaster city police have spent plenty of time responding to calls there, said city Sgt. Gary Means, though some stores require more attention than others.

"At Barnes and Noble, there were no problems at all," said Means. But at Home Depot, there have been sporadic problems with contractors' trucks being broken into.

In early April, a melee caused by a shoplifter at the Sports Authority store got scary when a witness to the police pursuit fired a gun in the air. No one was hurt.

"And we get a lot of accidents in the parking lot," said Means. "Christmastime is always the worst."

At Kendig Square in Willow Street, local district justice Maynard A. "Bud" Hamilton

said that "bad checks are a bigger problem for us; there's not a lot of retail theft" cases.

Every large retail center "will have its own unique problems. Being open 24 hours, that's a big problem; there are a lot of dirtbags up half the night. ...

You get some real hardcore ones, who try and walk out with a TV to support a drug habit."

Indeed, though most officers are hesitant to be quoted as saying so, the clientele a store serves can be a major factor in the amount of crime there. Regardless of size, upscale stores tend not to generate as many cases of bad checks or credit card fraud, though parking lot fender-benders, customers locked out of cars and similar incidents requiring police attention are just as common.

Large parking lots, the likes of which superstores must build, also can be a magnet for problems, from robberies to vehicles that get "dinged" and people who simply lock themselves out of their cars and call the police to help.

Just as important, though, is how a store handles crime. Ephrata Township detective Ortenzi says some hire too few security guards, decline to conduct investigations on their own, and basically dump everything in the the lap of law enforcement: "If a retail establishment takes the attitude that they're just going to turn it all over to the police, then the police have their work cut out for them," he said.

Wal-Mart, he said, "does help us out. ... They have been very cooperative and have taken a very active part" by conducting investigations into minor items like bad checks. "That's rare," said Ortenzi.

Ultimately, though, cops say all development results in more calls and more problems.

"With a big store, it may be more concentrated in one area," said Manheim Township police Sgt. Wayne Wagner. "But police have to take a neutral approach. If people want to steal something, they're going to steal it.

"And it's simply going to be a bigger problem (at a big box) than at a mom-and-pop store." gsmart@lnpnews.com