

Neighborhood Retail Alliance

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Big Box Store Battles

One of the gravest threats to our union is the invasion of big box stores into New York City. It goes without saying, of course, that Wal-Mart is the box store that has the greatest ability to destroy so much of the hard-earned gains that Local 342 has achieved for its members. That is why we have mobilized all of our forces to prevent this predator, and its copy-cat cousins, from taking over the New York market.

So far the fist returns are in and the results are overwhelmingly in our favor. Most of you have probably already heard about the defeat of the first Wal-Mart site in Rego Park, Queens. What you don't know is how we managed to achieve not only this historic victory but also, almost as historic, the defeat of a BJ's Warehouse Club in the Bronx.

In New York City, most box stores are too large to enter this market without getting some kind of change in the existing zoning laws. In order to do this a developer of a big box store must apply for permission to alter the zoning of an area. This application then must go through the city's Uniform Land Use Review Procedure, known by its acronym ULURP.

The ULURP process involves the local area community board, the borough president, the City Planning Commission and, finally, the City Council. Only the Commission and the Council, however, have the power to block a project. Since under Mayor Bloomberg most big development gets rubber stamped it is really only the City Council that opponents can look towards for help in beating a box store project.

The fight against BJ's was started almost two years ago. In beginning this battle we realized that stopping BJ's could send a powerful message and could be an important step in eventually stopping Wal-Mart's entry into the city. We first made sure that our sister locals – UFCW Local 1500, UFCW Local 348, RWDSU Local 338 – were united in the coalition. We then went and enlisted the aid of Brian McLaughlin and the Central Labor Council.

Once labor was united we joined forces with the Neighborhood Retail Alliance, a group that represents employers in the food business. Our coalition reached out to Bronx elected officials such as Democratic chairman José Rivera, Council Majority Leader Joel Rivera and Councilmember Annabel Palma. With the help of these officials we managed to get the support of the entire Bronx delegation to the City Council. From there it was a short step towards getting Council Speaker Gifford Miller, the power of the legislature, to support our position.

As the BJ's application was coming to the City Council for a final vote it was announced in the media that Wal-Mart was ready to come into Rego Park, Queens, with its first city store. This was great timing for us because we were able to make the vote on BJ's a vote also on Wal-Mart and we found out that the City Council was strongly opposed to Wal-Mart's anti-union, anti-small business philosophy.

As a result, in February the City Council's Land Use Committee unanimously voted down the BJ's application and sent a strong message to Wal-Mart. Vornado, the big real estate developer that controls the Rego Park project, understood the message and, rather than risk losing its entire investment, told Wal-Mart it no longer wanted it as a

tenant in the Queens development. Vornado's message to Wal-Mart: "Hit the Road Jack."

The victories against BJ's and Wal-Mart are sweet but we can't sit back and rest on our laurels because we know that Wal-Mart especially is not going to back down from a fight. We now need to expand our coalition even further and prepare for the mother of all battles. Wal-Mart is like the death star in Star Wars. Just when you think it has been killed, it comes back to life stronger than ever. When it does, we will be ready.