

Foes fault plan for 'big-box' store in Rapho

Supervisors hear concerns about impact on family farm, small business community

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The impact of a discount retailer opening a "big-box" store in a traditional farming community was debated at the March 15 meeting of Rapho Township supervisors.

Debra Benner spoke for residents opposed to plans for the Wal-Mart supercenter proposed along Strickler Road adjacent to Route 283.

Benner said, "We feel the majority of the public in Rapho are not educated about Wal-Mart. We're at a major crossroads that will affect the future of this township and its focus on farming."

Benner, of 1020 Pinkerton Road, said she and her family are farmers and also operate a bed and breakfast.

She said, "We're very concerned about the amount of money Wal-Mart takes out of our local community. We know historically that they can set their prices low to drive existing businesses out of business and then jack up their prices."

Benner and other residents cited concerns about traffic and crime that could arise from the proposed Wal-Mart as well as the effect on small family owned businesses in nearby Mount Joy

Borough.

Gerald Erb of Oak Grove Farms, 915 Longenecker Road, said, "Where's the wisdom of embracing a monopoly in our community."

Businessman Charlie Engle told supervisors, "Your vision is such a key thing. Ten years ago you said you want retail, but not a 'big-box' retailer. I'm not saying keep out retail, but keep out the 'big box'.

If you put a big-box retail store there, it will impact neighboring communities. The people I talk to say Wal-Mart would be a bad impact. I'd like to see you stick to your ordinance," Engle said.

He represented Engle Printing & Publishing. The resident of East Donegal Township also serves as a member of Main Street Mount Joy, a group dedicated to revitalizing Mount Joy's downtown.

He said, "Why do we need another Wal-Mart in our backyard?"

Lancaster developer William Murry said, "The backyard is the issue."

He said he purchased the commercially zoned tract in 1976. Because it was not served by public water and sewer, he could not develop it. Several years ago, he and other developers invested capital to extend public water and sewer area, which was designated as

the township's growth triangle in cooperation with the township and Mount Joy Borough Authority.

"When it comes down to land use, what does it matter what name goes on the building," he said.

Murray and his associates are proposing a 180,000-square-foot Wal-Mart on a 22-acre tract. The land is zoned interchange commercial, which allows stores such as Wal-Mart as a conditional use. Rapho's "big-box" ordinance pertains to store of more than 100,000 square feet.

Murry's proposal also would require amendments or waivers from portions of that ordinance. The developer's initial proposal allows for four parking spaces per 1,000 square feet of floor space and 70 percent coverage of the lot, while the township ordinance calls for 7.5 parking spaces per 1,000 square feet of floor space and no more than 55 percent of the lot covered with pavement and buildings.

Lowell Fry, chairman of Rapho supervisors, said Murry and Wal-Mart have not presented an official plan to the township.

Fry said, "The challenge we face (when a plan is submitted) is that we cannot base the decision on who the ultimate user will be. It's a land-use decision. Our 'big-

box' ordinance catches at 20,000 square feet, which would even include a strip mall. It is put there to bring people to the table so we can have more of a say," he said.

All three supervisors expressed concerns with traffic impacts and crime.

Rapho manager Nancy Halliwell said, "We know (the proposal) won't just affect our township, so we've been talking with Mount Joy Borough about this, too."

She said the township and borough are compiling a list of intersections to be included in the traffic study that Wal-Mart will have to conduct.

Halliwell said since Murry unveiled plans for Wal-Mart to supervisors on Dec. 14, the township asked for comment from residents and received about 100 calls. The callers included 70 Rapho residents, and only nine of the callers expressed opposition.

Halliwell said, "I think those people were informed about Wal-Mart. Many of those people who responded were very specific. They already shop at Wal-Mart and would like to have one closer. Some of them were elderly and wanted a one-stop shop. Some of them wanted the jobs that Wal-Mart will bring."