

## **Bringing Wal-Mart to a New Level:**

What happened to multi-story retail stores?

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Planning Commissions have an eye for details. By focusing on project details, Commissioners often identify traffic problems, eye sores, and hidden dangers that need to be eliminated before a project can proceed. But the devil isn't always in the details. When reviewing big-box development proposals, many communities have stopped asking basic design and planning questions and started to accept unnecessary impacts associated with urban sprawl.

For example, Wal-Mart and other big-box developments have a tendency to vacate existing sites in favor of new locations in rural areas. The standard excuse for this type of big-box sprawl is the need for increased square footage. Bigger stores need bigger lots and Wal-Mart has no choice but to push Wisconsin cities farther into the country-side, right?

Well, no. Wal-Mart moves to undeveloped areas because it insists on using an out-dated, inefficient store model instead of newer retail designs used in other cities across the nation. In Wisconsin communities, like Monroe and Stoughton, Wal-Mart has the capability to expand existing big-box stores with far less impact on community and its surrounding environment. Using the existing footprint, the expanded Wal-Mart should include:

**Underground Parking.** Wal-Mart can and does build its Supercenters with underground parking. For example, in Monona, Wisconsin, Wal-Mart is currently building a 203,000 square foot Wal-Mart Supercenter on the 14-acre site of a vacant K-Mart. Why isn't Wal-Mart using its current stores in Monroe or Stoughton in the same way?

**Low Impact Development.** Green roofs, parking lot gardens, and porous pavement are a few of the design features that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is promoting to limit the amount of polluted run-off created by big-box development. Given the clear environmental and economic benefits (i.e. lower long-term energy costs), big-box retailers, like IKEA, have been integrating these design features in to their developments for years. However, instead of using low impact development techniques, Wal-Mart has been offering concrete storm detention ponds and paving over even more land in the process.

**Multi-level Design.** Retail stores can, and should be built with more than one floor. As of 2006, Wal-Mart operated at least 20 multi-level stores, many of them in buildings

vacated by other retailers. Why isn't Wal-Mart adding a second floor to their existing stores in Monroe and Stoughton, doubling the square footage?

In the past, multi-story retail buildings and parking structures defined downtown commercial areas. Concerned about the impacts of sprawl, many communities are attempting to return to the multi-level retail design to promote sustainable development.

Yet, despite better designs, sprawling parking lots and single-story supercenters continue to rapidly replace Wisconsin farms, paving over land at a rate three-times faster than our population growth.

The days of accepting Wal-Mart's worst should be gone by now. Before we get to the details of a big-box development proposal, Planning Commissions should address basic concerns with the single-story design and expansive parking lots. Wisconsin communities deserve the most efficient design that Wal-Mart offers, regardless of opportunities to cut costs by taking over farms. At your next Planning Commission meeting, make sure your Commissioners are demanding the best that big-box retailers have to offer and taking your community to the next level.

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