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Potential Wal-Mart Alarms Critics

By Paula King
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OAKLEY - The potential arrival of the world's largest retailer has become the talk of the community in recent weeks. Several commercial-zoned sites in the growing city have space available for a mix of large-scale stores, and retail giants such as Target, Costco and Lowe's have looked into locating there. Those megaretailers haven't produced the apprehension and controversy, though, that Wal-Mart has brought to Oakley in recent months.

"We do not need Wal-Mart in Oakley. They will devastate us," said longtime resident Harriet Zych. "We cannot support Wal-Mart in this city."

Throughout the nation, Wal-Mart has been accused of driving out mom-and-pop stores and slashing the sales tax base in small communities because of its low prices and large supply of imported goods. Some Oakley merchants believe that Wal-Mart's presence could harm the city's grocery stores and small businesses.

Hook, Line & Sinker owner and local angler Gene Buchholz said that Wal-Mart could hurt his business by offering the same fishing equipment at lower prices. Buchholz added, however, that the specialized aspect of his business that attracts professional anglers, including his product knowledge and customer service, would remain untouched by Wal-Mart.

Yet he recognizes that other small businesses might not fare that well against a retailer of Wal-Mart's size and influence. Buchholz said he thought many other businesses would not be able to coexist with the mighty big box, especially if it is a Supercenter.

"If they allow a super Wal-Mart to come to town, it is going to close the door on other entrepreneurs," Buchholz said. "A super Wal-Mart is more of a detriment to the city than what it would offer."

Oakley doesn't have a single large-scale retailer. The new city needs that commercial growth, and residents want those shopping options, according to City Manager Bryan Montgomery.

"The city is in need of the sales tax revenue that is being bled off to Brentwood and Antioch," Montgomery said. "Right now, there is so much retail bleeding in Oakley that it will help everyone to keep those dollars in the area."

He added that some small businesses would feel an impact from Wal-Mart but that many would be able to find a strong niche by being creative and unique in their business practices. These large retailers and the traffic they bring offer economic synergy to other stores, Montgomery predicted.

Oakley business owner Doug Hardcastle welcomes some competition because of the added foot traffic. While mom-and-pop stores can't compete with Wal-Mart's prices, they can compete through service, he said.

"It is all about local knowledge. You just have to adapt with the changes," Hardcastle said.

Wal-Mart representatives couldn't confirm any plans for an Oakley location but said that the company is looking to better serve its

Oakley customers who frequent the Antioch store on Lone Tree Way. Wal-Mart spokeswoman Daphne Moore said that it is not uncommon for some regions to have several stores.

"In most small communities, they (small businesses) are already competing with large-scale retailers in other areas. We stock our product and sell it at a price that our customer wants," Moore said.

Wal-Mart's proposed expansion on Lone Tree Way has been controversial among area neighbors who fear that the 24-hour operation would increase crime, noise, pollution and traffic. The Oakley store would likely be located along Main Street near Big Break Road, which is far from residential neighborhoods, Montgomery pointed out.

Montgomery said the city has no say in who the property owners chose to sell land to for commercial development. Over in Hercules, city officials recently decided for the second time this year to use eminent domain to halt Wal-Mart's plans for a megastore.

Zych said that Wal-Mart is interested in Oakley because of its recent growth spurt, but the city of about 30,000 residents can't support this type of operation. She fears that it will attract an undesirable element from older parts of Antioch and force some small stores to go bankrupt.

"We have a younger set of people in Oakley now, and we need to supply them with the merchandise they need to stay in Oakley. But if you want Oakley to be upscale, you aren't going to be upscale with Wal-Mart," Zych said.

Instead of attracting Wal-Mart, Buchholz said the city should take advantage of amenities such as the Delta to encourage people to visit Oakley. Wal-Mart won't create a higher standard of living in the community, Buchholz said.

"I'm not just looking at what is going to happen today," he said. "I'm looking at what will happen to my kids in the future."

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