

Officials weigh solutions to address the growing presence of mega-sized retailers — and the large, empty facilities they often leave behind

BIG-BOX BLIGHT



GARY KYLE ILLUSTRATION/STAFF

SUPER-SIZED LIFESTYLE: Monolithic retailers can have a considerable, long-term impact on communities

By DIANE ELDRIDGE

For the Herald-Journal

In the "old" days, we drank 6.5-ounce Coca-Colas, ate postage-stamp sized Krystal burgers, shopped at the local clothiers and stocked our pantries with goods from the neighborhood grocery store. Back then, a typical local retail store ranged anywhere from 500 to 10,000 square feet in size.

These days, we wash down our double-quarter-pound cheeseburger with a gigantic 32-ounce soft drink, and we buy our clothing, office supplies, hardware and groceries in stores that cover as much as four or five acres of land. It seems we've super-sized everything!

At 180,000-plus square feet, today's super retail centers offer it all under one roof at lower prices — everything from dresses and tires to eggs and gasoline. We can have our cars serviced while we shop for ribbons, rhubarb and rifles.

Likewise, the new home improvement centers are 18 times the size of a traditional hardware

store, and mega-office supply stores are five times larger than their traditional counterparts.

The influx of big-box stores into small towns and suburbs throughout the nation has caught many communities off-guard. These monolithic, monotonous concrete block buildings promise lower prices but have hidden costs not reflected in the price tags of the products they sell: traffic congestion; disruption of neighborhoods; loss of trees, open space and farmland; low-paying jobs that do not support families; displaced small businesses; dying downtowns with vacant buildings; abandoned shopping centers; air and water pollution; and sprawl.

As columnist Neal Peirce of the Washington Post Writers Group so succinctly put it, "When you buy for less at (a big-box store), you're paying. It's just a question out of which pocket."

The rise of the big box began only 40 years ago and has now grown into a national phenomenon.

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WHAT THEY'RE SAYING...



"Some communities simply limit the size allowed for retail buildings. ... Others limit the "footprint" (the area of land covered by the building). Design standards for big boxes can address ... features ..."

DIANE ELDRIDGE,
Upstate Forever director of education and advocacy



"I believe that the county, along with the municipalities, should require the developers of big boxes over a specified size, prior to obtaining a permit, to secure and maintain a bond sufficient to cover the cost of demolition."

JEFF HORTON,
Spartanburg County Council chairman

Eldridge

◆ **IMPACT** continued from A11 Wal-Mart alone boasts nearly 3,000 retail stores, supercenters, Sam's Clubs and "neighborhood markets" and registered a staggering \$6.67 billion in profits just last year. During October 2003 alone, it opened 42 stores in the United States and plans to open one nearly every day somewhere in this country in 2004.

Regardless of whether one likes big-box stores, it is inarguable that their impacts are

considerable and long-term. Local officials owe it to their constituents to anticipate and understand, and to consider using tools that minimize, these negative effects on communities. Such tools include, but are not limited to, design standards, retail size limits and abandonment protection. In addition, communities should take steps to strengthen existing small businesses that could be hurt by the arrival of the big boxes.

Some communities simply limit the size allowed for retail buildings. Westford, Mass., prohibits stores with more than

60,000 square feet; Rockville, Md.'s cap is 65,000 square feet; and Roswell, Ga.'s is 100,000.

Others limit the "footprint" (the area of land covered by the building). Hailey, Idaho, allows multi-story structures, but the total footprint cannot exceed 25,000 or 36,000 square feet, depending on the zoning classification.

Design standards for big boxes can address such features as exterior facade design, materials and colors; building height; entrances; pedestrian accessibility; landscaping requirements; screening of

outdoor storage, disposal, heating and air conditioning equipment and loading operations; and others.

One example can be found in design standards adopted by Fort Collins, Colo., in 1995. They apply to all retail establishments with more than 25,000 square feet in size and require that exterior facades incorporate interesting architectural features to break up the monotony of long wall expanses of more than 100 feet. To ensure that buildings are compatible with adjoining neighborhoods, "high quality materials" like brick, wood and sandstone in subtle colors must be used on exterior surfaces. No smooth-faced concrete block may be used as a predominant facade material.

Roofs must have features that add architectural interest like varying slope planes and overhanging eaves, and parapets must be used to conceal flat roofs and heating and air conditioning equipment from public view. Outdoor storage, trash collection and loading areas must be screened from

the view of adjoining neighborhoods and public streets, and the development must incorporate pedestrian scale features like patio seating, a water feature or an outdoor playground. Adequate pedestrian walkways are required and must be distinguished from road surfaces by using materials like bricks, pavers or scored concrete.

In pursuit of larger, riper markets, big-box retailers frequently close older, smaller stores and open bigger ones, often only a short distance away. Concerned that these "retail graveyards" will depress economic development and property values and invite crime and vandalism, some communities have passed regulations that directly address big-box blight.

Developers in Buckingham Township, Pa., must put money in an escrow account to cover demolition costs in case their superstores become vacant. Bozeman, Mont., requires developers to design big-box stores with flexible features such as partitions and multiple entryways to facilitate reuse by

multiple tenants if the store is abandoned and to submit plans for reuse if the original tenant leaves. City leaders in Evanston, Wyo., negotiated an agreement that requires a big-box retailer to help the city find new tenants if it vacates its store.

Other communities use zoning to control the amount of land available for commercial uses, thus making it more difficult for big-box owners to simply "move down the street."

It all comes down to choices. Communities do not have to adopt an "anything goes" policy and accept whatever large retailers want. They can set standards to ensure that developments won't adversely affect their quality of life.

If big-box developers believe there is a market for their business, stringent community standards will rarely stop their plans. But if the community doesn't care enough to set the bar high, the big-box prototype is what you'll get.

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