

Article published November 15, 2006

PROPOSAL DEFEATED 5-0

Bedford Township board rejects Wal-Mart plan

300 residents jam meeting hall

By BENJAMIN ALEXANDER-BLOCH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

Bedford Township residents spoke out against a proposed Wal-Mart Supercenter last night, and their board listened, voting 5-0 against a settlement that would have allowed a 204,000-square-foot big-box store.

The nearly 300 residents at the board meeting, who overflowed the meeting room in the Township Hall and held protest signs outside, gave the board a standing ovation after its decision.

"The people spoke. It's that simple," said Supervisor **Walt Wilburn**, who said he would not state his opinion on the proposal because of pending litigation.

"I was afraid it wasn't going to turn out this way," said Temperance resident Bill Daniels. "I moved from Toledo to Bedford to get away from all the crime and other congestion, and now they are trying to move North Toledo to me.

"But at least now, with the board's decision, it gives us a fighting chance."

The Whitman Ford Company's lawsuit against the township is scheduled for Dec. 11-12 in Monroe County Circuit Court before Judge Joseph Costello, Jr.

The suit is over a 51-acre parcel owned by the Whitman family on the northwest corner of Sterns Road and Lewis Avenue. Jon Whitman filed suit after the township board blocked two rezoning requests — one in 2003 and another in 2004.

The board's reasoning was the same on both occasions. It said commercial zoning for the entire parcel — including the portion zoned residential — would be incompatible with neighboring residential zoning and in violation of the township's master plan.



Scott Pickard of Bedford Township voices his support for a proposed settlement that would allow Wal-Mart to build a Supercenter at Sterns Road and Lewis Avenue.
(THE BLADE/AMY E. VOIGT)



Roy Wood, vice president of United Auto Workers Local 14, holds a sign protesting Wal-Mart's proposal at last night's meeting. (THE BLADE/AMY E. VOIGT)

"I just don't think it would fit in the township," said Trustee Dennis Steinman, who cast the sole vote in favor of rezoning the parcel in years past.

In response to why he voted differently last night than before, he said, "Time changes things and you learn to look at things differently."

Temperance resident Hillary Folk, 15, said she worried about the negative impacts of development on the future of her community.

"In the long run, it's going to affect my generation the most because we'll be here much longer than you ... because we're younger," she said.

Throughout the meeting, a stack of over 500 letters from residents against the settlement sat on the edge of the board's podium.

During the last two weeks, a local citizens' group, bedfordwatch.com, collected over 1,000 petitions from residents against it. This group formed in 2001 to oppose Wal-Mart's plans to build on the Whitman land.

Trustee Paul Francis, Mr. Whitman's cousin, abstained from voting because he said "an appearance of a conflict of interest seems to be present."

Many residents who spoke at the meeting complained that the attorney representing the township in the lawsuit, David Landry of Farmington Hills, may not have their best interests in mind.

Mr. Landry was hired by Midwest Claims, the adjusting arm for the township's insurance company, Township Participating Plan. The insurance company would have to continue to pay for the township's legal defense in the lawsuit if a settlement was not reached last night. It would also have to pay damages if the township loses the suit.

Township Attorney Phil Goldsmith said Mr. Landry is an excellent trial lawyer and that Mr. Landry is "ethically obligated to represent the township to the best of his abilities."

If the township loses its pending lawsuit, the insurance company would only pay up to \$1 million in damages. The township would have to come up with any additional amount, Mr. Goldsmith said.

Trustee Larry O'Dell was absent from the board meeting because he was in the hospital recovering from knee surgery. But he sent a letter to the board stating he

did not support rezoning the Whitman parcel.

Contact Benjamin Alexander-Bloch at: babloch@theblade.com or 419-724-6050.