

ECONOMY NEWS

BUSINESS
Severance
packages
shrinking
Page 7

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SECTION B, PAGE 1

Big-box battle brewing in Bedford

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TEMPERANCE — Bedford Township residents are gearing up for another battle against what they say are plans to bring a big-box retailer to the municipality.

They say Jon and Paul Whitman are planning to sell 30 acres near Lewis Avenue, just north of Sterns, to developers who want to build a Wal-Mart store on the land. It is a proposal that residents say they will fight

vigorously.

"I can predict that there will be strong public sentiment against that," said Dennis Rabb, an Indian Road resident. "It really isn't good for anybody."

Less than two years after another group of township residents successfully fended off plans to build a Meijer store at Sterns and Secor Road, Mr. Rabb and others say they plan to wage a similar battle.

Mr. Rabb and others say the

Whitmans told them about the plans at a dinner meeting Thursday. The Whitmans invited about 30 to 35 neighbors of the property to the meeting to outline plans for the property, which is a portion of a 40-acre tract next to the family's car dealership, Whitman Ford, on Lewis.

Those who attended the meeting said that Jon Whitman and his father, Paul, told them that the family wants to sell the parcel so Wal-Mart, the Bentonville, Ark.-based retail giant, can

build a store.

Jon Whitman, owner of Whitman Ford, yesterday confirmed that he is looking to sell 30 acres of the parcel, which is bordered to the south by Sterns and to the west by Indian Road.

But he would not disclose the details of the meeting with residents at Memories Banquet Hall on Lewis.

"That's between us and these people," Mr. Whitman said. "We don't have a comment about what

happened at a private meeting."

But two residents who attended the meeting told The Blade the message was clear: Wal-Mart wants to come.

At the meeting, the Whitmans gave residents some history on the dealership and the parcel. Don Ayers of Indian said the Whitmans told them they had a file cabinet stuffed with offers for the property, but did not want to see

See **BATTLE**, Page 4 ►

Battle

► Continued from Page 1

the land become a strip mall, doctors' offices, or a mobile home park. Then they told the residents of the plans for a Wal-Mart.

"They said, 'We want somebody that has deep pockets,'" Mr. Rabb said, adding that the Whitmans said a Wal-Mart would be better than having a less successful company build that might not be able to deliver on what it promises.

Mr. Ayers said the Whitmans did not provide many details about their plans.

"Every time we asked a pointed question, they danced around it," Mr. Ayers said.

One potential problem for the Whitmans and Wal-Mart is zoning.

Part of the parcel for the proposed store is zoned commercial, while another part is listed as residential, according to Steve Lennex, a real estate broker for Michael Realty, which represents the Whitmans.

But Mr. Lennex said the potential buyer of the property would try for a "planned unit development" approval, rather than attempting to change the zoning of residential portion of the property to commercial. Under that plan, a Wal-Mart store could be built with the current zoning. Such a move could give the township more control over the project.

Mr. Lennex would not confirm the identity of the buyer, but said a sales contract was pending and the buyer would be trying to get the various governmental approvals in the next 30 to 60 days.

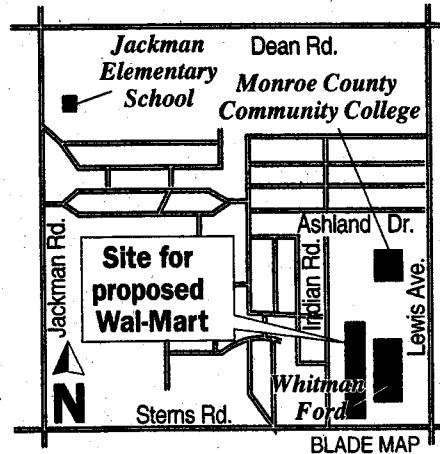
"We're negotiating the final details of the contract right now," Mr. Lennex said, adding that the buyer would set up a meeting with residents to explain its proposal once the sale was complete.

It wasn't clear what kind of store Wal-Mart wants to build at the site.

Wal-Mart discount stores typically are 40,000 to 125,000 square feet, have about 150 employees, and offer a range of items from clothing to health and beauty aids to home furnishings to electronics to hardware. Its superstores are 110,000 to 230,000 square feet, employ about 350, and also have groceries and services such as eye care and auto care.

Regardless of its size, the proposed store already has sparked opposition. Both Mr. Ayers and Mr. Rabb said residents are opposed. Leaflets advising residents of the project and asking for support to block it have been distributed, Mr. Ayers said.

"I don't think anyone would have had any squabbles if they put in a housing development or a doctor's office," Mr. Rabb said.



Among the neighbors' chief objections, Mr. Rabb said, will be traffic congestion, pollution, and noise concerns some say will destroy their quality of life in this Toledo bedroom community.

"This is going to be right in my backyard," said Nina Calmes, an Ashland Drive resident who did not attend Thursday's meeting. "I don't like it. Why would I want a Wal-Mart in my backyard? Traffic is terrible trying to get out on Lewis Avenue as is."

LaMar Frederick, the township supervisor, said he has received about six calls from residents about the property last week and the township planning department received the same number. Bedford Township must approve the final plans. The township does not have a proposal from developers.

Residents wanted to know where entrances would be put, how much impact the added traffic would have, what kind of buffering there would be between the store and the residential area, and about noise and pollution issues, he said.

"Many of them were looking for the same type of information we are," he said. "We'll be working on all of these [issues] when we have an official site plan."

Township residents in 2000 mounted a successful campaign against a proposal to build a Meijer store at the intersection of Secor and Smith Road. The proposal, which included several homes and condominiums, was withdrawn in part when it became clear it would have a difficult time winning the needed rezoning from the township.

Mr. Ayers said residents opposed to the Wal-Mart store would contact those who led the effort against the Meijer store.

Wal-Mart spokesman Tom Williams said he had no information about plans for a store in Bedford Township.