

Whitmans announce contract with Wal-Mart

By CURTIS ZIMMERMANN
Bedford Now

At a press conference Nov. 18 at the Monroe County Community College's Whitman Center, Jon Whitman, co-owner of Whitman Ford, formally announced that his family had a contract with Wal-Mart, the nation's largest retailer, to build a store on property at the corner of Sterns Rd. and Lewis Ave. in Temperance.

The announcement came nearly one year after the Whitmans told a group of residents that they had been negotiating with the company.

Since then, the Whitmans have

been at the center of a large public debate that has stretched from the chambers of the township board to the water coolers and back yards of the township. But until Tuesday, the family has remained publicly silent.

Wal-Mart, Whitman said, has an option to purchase the land and has told the Whitmans that if it does not get approval to build on this site, it will try to build farther north on Lewis Ave. across from the community college or on Alexis Rd. in Toledo. Whitman said that he had offered to sell his land to local residents opposed to the

development, but had no buyers.

The new store, according to Whitman, will be located directly behind the current Whitman Ford. Wal-Mart is planning to build a dry goods store and might expand to include a grocery store in a few years. Whitman estimates that the store will generate between \$3 million and \$5 million a year in tax revenue to state and local governments.

Whitman said he believes a thriving commercial business will help increase property values and business revenues in that area of the township.

Whitman said that a majority of the products sold within a Wal-Mart store, such as sporting goods, clothes, housewares, home furnishings, shoes, books, electronic equipment, compact disks and toys, are not available in Bedford Township.

Whitman Ford also will be expanding its operations. Since this will subject the business to the township's new zoning amendments, which have been strongly criticized by business owners, including Whitman, he said that his company would work with the township on how to expand the operations and

find a compromise.

He said in Canton Township, which enacting ordinances on which Bedford's are based, car dealerships are exempt from some of the provisions with regards to both lighting and the construction of berms, which are small hills built to block the view of parking lots.

Both the Wal-Mart and the Whitman Ford facilities will share a detention pond located adjacent to the community college, Whitman said.

Whitman said that he has site

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Residents speak out at board meeting

At the Bedford Township Board meeting Tuesday night, some residents showed up thinking that Wal-Mart was making its presentation. Township Supervisor LaMar Frederick stated that it wasn't on the agenda nor had Wal-Mart submitted any plans to the township.

But residents spoke out both during and after the meeting.

“I'm not looking forward to the battle ahead. But I'm willing to do it because I believe in our way of life in Bedford.”

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Wal-Mart (cont.)

approval over this Wal-Mart and that he has insisted that the company not build one of its gray box-type stores. Instead, he compared the new development to the earth tone, residential character of the Wal-Mart being constructed in Canton Township.

Whitman said that Wal-Mart also would, pending approval of the Monroe County Road Commission, pay to have a portion of Lewis Ave. north of Sterns Rd. expanded to five lanes, and portions of Sterns adjacent to the property expanded to three lanes.

According to Bedford Township's current zoning map, the property is zoned C-2 and R-2.

In the township file on the Whitmans' property, it states that in April, 1980, a few years after they bought the property, the Whitmans applied for a change in zoning, which was then mostly residential with the exception of the dealership. The resulting map in the file shows that a portion of the property was changed to C-2 while a portion remained R-2.

Though records indicate that both Jon and his father, Paul, were present when the change was approved, Jon said he does not remember the outcome.

"We simply do not remember from the early 1980s," Jon said. "We relied on what the township told us."

The township told them, on

► *If Wal-Mart is unsuccessful in getting the Lewis and Sterns site approved, officials have said they will seek to build either farther north on Lewis or on Alexis Rd. in Toledo.*

subsequent zoning maps printed in the early 1990s, their property was all C-2.

Jon Whitman said that the property also has been taxed as C-2 property. Currently, the township's assessing system still has the property listed as C-2 and Bedford Township tax records dating back seven years reflect the commercial assessment.

"It's assessed on the predicated use of the property," said Barbara Blake, township assessor.

As a result, when the Whitmans first listed the property for sale in 1998, they had it listed as all C-2.

"We thought we had the zoning," Whitman said.

Not until June, 2001, did they find that there might be some discrepancies.

Township Zoning/Planning coordinator Dennis Jenkins sent the Whitmans a letter informing them that there had been a mistake and that the property was

actually partially zoned residential.

When questioned by Bedford Now reporters, Jenkins said that it was a mistake made in the late 1980s when maps were redrawn. He said the township has discovered other such mistakes, but nothing on this scale.

"That oversight was my fault," Jenkins, who has been with the township for 16 years, said. "I take full responsibility."

Since the Whitmans already began negotiations with Wal-Mart when they received this correction, Whitman said that he was encouraged by township officials to seek a Planned Unit Development (PUD) for the property.

A PUD is an overlay zone that allows parcels to be built on properties that are not necessarily or entirely zoned for that purpose, but still fit in with the character of the property and the area.

The process requires numerous hearings. The first set of hearings is during the conceptual stage. A public hearing is then held before the planning commission, which passes its recommendations on to the township board.

If the township board approves the concept, the petitioner then submits a formal site plan, which is looked at by the Bedford Township Planning Commission and the Monroe County Planning Commission for a recommendation.

Final approval ultimately rests with the township board.

Last spring, the township amended the PUD ordinance to state that residents can call for township approval on any PUD approved or denied by the township board.

Under Michigan state law, to call for a referendum, a resident must file notice with the township clerk within seven days of the publishing of the board's decision. Then, within 30 days, the petitioners must gather signatures totaling 10 percent of the number of people who voted for governor in the last election.

If this happens, then in the next election, the issue will appear on the ballot, in the meantime, nothing can be done to the property.

While the township's new building ordinances, passed in August, state that no building on property zoned C-2 can be larger than 70,000 square feet, Jenkins said that variances can be approved by the township board for both C-2 properties and PUDs. The approval would be part of the site plan process.

So is this area suited for commercial development?

That depends on which master plan you look at. In the 1997 plan, the property was sited as a township commercial center; however, the master plan passed in 2002 has the property slated

for parks and recreation.

This is not the first big box store proposed in Bedford. Twice, Meijer has proposed to build one of its stores in the township. The first time was in the early 1990s, at the corner of Secor and Sterns Rds. (the site of the current Kroger Plaza). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Meijer proposed a store for the corner of Secor and Smith Rds. Meijer withdrew both plans due to lack of public support.

Jon Whitman said what separates this project from Meijer is that for years residents have known that his property, because of both the zoning and master plan maps, could possibly have a store of this nature.

Wal-Mart is in the process of engineering the site. The company will then make a formal proposal to the township board.

Jon Whitman said that a committee is forming in Bedford to support the project. He would not give names of officials on the committee, but he did say that he and his family would not be on it.

He said that if the Wal-Mart project falls through, then he will probably petition the township board to have the remainder of his property rezoned C-2.

CROSSWORD ANSWERS

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