

Opinion

## Reader's write: More big boxes in Guilford?

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By Howard Brown, Special to the Times

Most people in Guilford know that the Ohio-based developer that owns the Rock Pile at Exit 57 has declared its proposed “lifestyle” shopping center dead. This is no surprise. Given the state of the economy two years ago, the project seemed unlikely to be finished, let alone succeed. Many of the chain stores the developer hoped to sign up in 2008 were already in or near Chapter 11 and trying to get out of their existing leases.

DDR, one of the biggest developers of shopping centers in the country, was fully aware of the risks it was running. Even so, it forged ahead in seeking all of the permits required to build on that site. In obtaining the permits, DDR agreed to comply with all of the town’s planning and zoning regulations--in particular, the long-standing requirement that no individual store in the Guilford Commons development should exceed 25,000 square feet (or 40,000 square feet, by special permit).

Faced with the potential loss of its investment in the Rock Pile, the developer has now returned with a new proposal to build a mammoth, 150,000-square-foot big-box retail store. They know that this proposal cannot, by the wildest stretch of imagination be called consistent with the town’s Plan of Conservation and Development, with which they previously committed to comply. More important, it contradicts the expressed intent of the Guilford’s residents who voted overwhelmingly against big-box stores in a packed town meeting and a 1998 survey commissioned by the town.

Like most residents, I want economic development that will expand our tax base and provide convenient shops and services. But before we jump on the mass-merchandising warehouse-store bandwagon, we need to make sure we study and understand all of the potential costs and consequences as well as the potential benefits. And we must seek independent assessments, not just rely on the developer who has no long-term stake in the quality of life in our town. The proposed zoning change for the Rock Pile will have an enormous long-term impact, so the decision-making process must be open and thorough. Among the issues to be addressed:

1. We need a careful, unbiased, independent analysis of traffic implications. The developer says that traffic won’t be a problem because of the shopping center’s proximity to I-95. This is simply untrue. Exit 57 has limited capacity, and all cars and delivery trucks must travel on Route 1 to reach the center. Moreover, the proposed store will attract customers from Durham, Middletown, Madison, and Branford, many of whom will use local roads and/or Routes 1, 22, and 77. Studies

in other communities show developers substantially underestimated traffic impacts of big box stores.

2. Changing the town's popular, and long-established ban on big-box stores almost certainly would open the door to similar proposals elsewhere along Route 1. Costco is one of the flagship retailers whose growth is closely tracked by the entire retail industry. Where they go, other chain stores follow. That's why you always see Costco stores near other big box stores. Do we really want the center of Guilford to look like Route 1 in Milford?

3. An unbiased assessment of the total impacts on the town budget must be made before any decision is taken. There are already reasons to question the company's estimated income to the town and none that document the real costs to the town. Studies across the country have drawn radically varying conclusions about the net result of big-box developments. Conclusions range from modest budget benefits to substantial net losses when all costs to towns are considered. Towns with big boxes are not exempt from budget woes.

4. In addition to the retail size limit, other constraints built into the existing zoning code would need to be revised. For example, the limit on the number of gas stations allowed on Route 1 has already been reached. Costco's filling station in Milford, one of the largest in the state, is fed by three tanker trucks every day—another reason to cast a skeptical eye on the developer's low-ball traffic projections.

This is one of the most important decisions Guilford's government has addressed in many years as it will have far reaching affects on the community. Residents need to make sure that it is based on the best, most objective, and public information available.

Howard Brown has lived in Guilford for 40 years and holds a masters degree in City Planning and has worked as a consultant in environment and resource planning to major corporations for 30 years.

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