

Opinion

Readers Write: Costco, not in line with town plan of development

Thursday, August 5, 2010

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Special to the Times

Twelve years ago, thousands of Guilford residents voted through surveys and/or at a Town Meeting to ban big-box stores and discourage the development of regional shopping centers. This consensus is reflected in Guilford's Plan of Conservation and Development, which states that economic development shall "utilize architectural and landscape design that is in scale with surroundings, and be compatible with the Town's cultural history, rural character, and unique topography."

As a result of this restriction, the Planning and Zoning Commission set a maximum size for one store in the Rock Pile zone at 25,000 square feet (with one store up to 40,000 square feet by special permit). The developer claims that amending the zoning code to permit a 150,000-square-foot warehouse store on the site will not result in other big boxes coming to town because the Rock Pile is a retail zone unto itself and any other proposals for such development elsewhere on Route 1 would have to be separately approved.

This argument is highly misleading. In fact, changing our zoning regulations to accommodate a big-box store in one zone would almost inevitably open the floodgates in other zones. Costco is considered a bellwether for the retail industry. Every other national chain, and dozens of real estate marketing firms, closely track its store-location decisions precisely because of Costco's enormous drawing power. It's no accident that big boxes and other chain stores always cluster around each other, to the eventual exclusion of almost every other kind of economic activity.

Once a single, "isolated" exception to the town's longstanding big-box ban is approved, the political (and possibly legal) pressure for accommodating other such stores will be practically unstoppable. Property owners along Route 1 will be contacted by other big-box stores, which will be in a position to argue convincingly that they are being discriminated against if their proposals for increasing store-size limits are denied.

Guilford residents need to understand that the issue is much bigger than a decision about one Costco store. It is not a simple matter of amending the zoning code to permit a single big box. The developer's proposal would necessitate other far-reaching changes that affect both our quality of life and the character of our town. Among other things:

- The Town Plan of Conservation and Development would have to be changed.
- The Town Comprehensive Plan would have to be changed.
- The environmental review for the Rock Pile would have to be conducted again because of potentially increased waste, water runoff, and the addition of an environmentally hazardous activity (a large gas station).
- The number of gas stations allowed on Route 1 would have to be increased.

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