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Harry Haskell: The True Cost of Big Boxes

By Harry Haskell

At first glance, the prospect of a big-box discount club's coming to Guilford would seem to be a win-win deal for everyone. The town gets needed tax revenue, residents get easy access to a major retailer, and the developer gets a high-profile tenant for the "Rockpile" at Exit 57.

All of these benefits are real, at least in the short term. As so often with big-box development, however, there are hidden costs that make the deal significantly less attractive for our community.

First, let's consider the pros and cons of having a chain superstore on our front doorstep. Families on tight budgets will welcome the convenience of buying groceries and other household goods in bulk without having to drive long distances. What's more, competition will encourage smaller, locally owned shops to lower their prices. At least, that's the theory.

In practice, high-volume, low-overhead retailers, which seek to dominate not only local but regional markets, tend to undercut local businesses by virtue of their outsized purchasing power, huge inventories, and propensity for price wars. In such a cutthroat environment, the only businesses that are likely to thrive are other chain stores.

Now consider the Rockpile, a problematic site that developers have eyed for years. After a highly contentious review process, an Ohio-based firm won approval to build a "lifestyle" shopping center comprised mainly of high-end chain stores. Those who opposed the project as the wrong kind of development in the wrong place at the wrong time came out on the short end of the argument. Fair enough.

Then came the collapse of the economy in 2008, prompting the developer to put those plans on hold. That too is fair, according to the accepted rules of the marketplace. But instead of taking its lumps, the developer now wants to rewrite the rules to permit it to build a 150,000-square-foot big box-nearly twice the size of the Walmart on Route 1.

This proposal flies in the face of the town's Plan of Conservation and Development, which places great emphasis on preserving Guilford's small-scale, rural character. And it flaunts the will of the majority of residents that has expressed opposition to warehouse-type stores along Route 1 and to regional shopping centers that exacerbate traffic congestion.

If this developer is allowed to have its way, does anyone seriously think that other big-box retailers can be prevented from setting up shop here? The Fonicello property and other parcels along Route 1 are ripe for the picking. It takes no great leap of imagination to foresee a town center bisected by a four-lane state highway and anchored by superstores clustered around exits 57 and 59.

Guilford's character, which reflects a commendable desire to conserve the best of the past and blend it with the new, is among its most precious assets. It is a major reason why many businesses, both large and small, are eager to locate here. We should welcome them, but on our terms, not theirs. That way we all stand to benefit.

Guilford resident Harry Haskell is president of the Guilford Preservation Alliance Board of Directors; he writes here as a private citizen.