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## Aspen Hill Business Owners Mobilize, Vie For Retail at Vacant BAE Building

Business owner: 'We really needed to get together, form a coalition, be stronger as one voice.'

- By [Tiffany Arnold](#)
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Credit [Tiffany Arnold](#)

Mary Jo Ember, at left, owns Aspen Hill Florist in Northgate Plaza in Aspen Hill. She is part of the Aspen Hill Business Coalition, which is advocating for retail to replace the vacant BAE Systems building. She's pictured here with her son, David Lee, 18, and daughter, Dominique Lee, 16.



Credit [Tiffany Arnold](#)

**(Updated)** With BAE System's exit from Aspen Hill, so went the lunch platform at the Aspen Hill Dunkin Donuts—and many regular breakfast customers.

"It used to be over there," said Boris Lander, the doughnut shop's owner, pointing to an elongated half-wall hiding restaurant equipment where the lunch platform used to be. Business has been slow ever since BAE Systems relocated in 2010. The building has been vacant since.

The Dunkin Donuts sits near the corner of Connecticut Avenue and Aspen Hill Road, right in front of the massive BAE site.

Feeling the sting of lost business, nearby business owners have mobilized, forming the Aspen Hill Business Coalition. They're advocating for bringing a new retailer to the site soon, with hopes that it would make Aspen Hill a better retail destination—translating into more customers in their shops.

"We really needed to get together, form a coalition, be stronger as one voice," Lander said.

The group held its first official meeting on March 21. About a dozen business owners were there.

"It's a big deal for us because it's our livelihood," Lander said. "Not only do we own businesses in Aspen Hill, but we also live in this community. We grew up here. We feel this space here [the vacant BAE building], staying the way it is, is just a detriment to our lives. It's a big eyesore that's sitting there."

On Tuesday, Montgomery County Council members discussed a proposal that would make it easier for Wal-Mart to open a store where the vacant building now stands. The problem is that the land is zoned for office space, not retail.

Council members Marc Elrich (D-At Large) and George Leventhal (D-At Large) were vocal critics of a Montgomery County Planning Board recommendation to consider a "minor master plan amendment" to expedite the zoning changes, several media outlets have reported.

They were concerned that the Planning Board was succumbing to pressure from the big-box giant.

Elrich said the minor amendment would lead to a "festival of spot zoning," [according to \*The Washington Post's\* account of the meeting](#).

But it was Leventhal who reportedly drew the ire of attendees—including Lander, who attended the meeting with several business owners and Aspen Hill residents.

Leventhal accused attendees of receiving their signs from Wal-Mart lobbyists, [The Washington Examiner](#) reported:

*"Once we open the door to either a developer or a large corporation that wants to be a tenant of that developer, [whose] printing up signs that say 'What's the wait, I think we have real concerns here,' he said. 'Who will pay for those signs next? And who will hire the lobbyists to distribute those signs?'"*  
"He was talking down to us," Lander told Patch on Wednesday. "A lot of people in the room felt like that it was disgusting, the way he was talking to us."

Lander said that despite the comments, business owners left the meeting "with a good feeling" and were happy that other council members "stood up for them."

He also clarified something: The Aspen Hill coalition isn't necessarily advocating for a Wal-Mart.

"That's not our point," Lander said. "Our point is that we want *something*. Something other than what's there now."

Mary Jo Ember owns Aspen Hill Florist in Northgate Plaza, across Connecticut Avenue from Dunkin Donuts. Ember did not attend Tuesday's meeting, though she is a member of the Aspen Hill Business Coalition.

Ember has owned the shop for 28 years and is a lifelong Aspen Hill resident. Her mother, Lorretta Ember, is also an Aspen Hill business owner, the proprietor of My Mom's Place on Georgia Avenue for more than 40 years.

The Embers said they've seen the population in Aspen Hill swell. But desirable retail was falling short despite the growth.

"People talk about how retail would congest things, but that happens with office space, too," Mary Jo Embers said. "There's already plenty of people here."

Embers said she was tired of having to go all the way to Rockville Pike to do her grocery shopping.

She and her mother said things would only improve if a retailer—say, Wal-Mart—set up at the old BAE site.

[Then Kohl's was built across the parking lot in 2012.](#) Foot traffic increased at Northgate.

"There are a lot more people not just coming to the shopping center, getting what they need and leaving, but people are shopping around the stores," Embers said. "Which is what retailers want."

Retailers are optimistic they'd see a similar trend if Wal-Mart opened in Aspen Hill. Lander, who also has a Dunkin Donuts at Northgate, said sales increased by 35 percent at the shop.

Aspen Hill's master plan isn't due to reach the council until 2017, [The Washington Post reports](#). A master plan amendment wouldn't be up for council consideration until 2015.

"We cannot sit here and watch another three to five years of this building sitting vacant," Lander told Patch.

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**Editor's note:** This story has been updated since it originally published. Kohl's came to Northgate in 2012.

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