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Council approves plan to speed zoning changes needed for Wal-Mart in Aspen Hill

By [Bill Turque](#), Published: May 6

A “minor” land-use plan that is likely to accelerate the opening of [a Wal-Mart in Aspen Hill](#) triggered a major debate in the Montgomery County Council on Monday, as members argued over the economic and social impact of the retailing giant.

By a 5 to 4 vote, the council approved a proposal by county planners to expedite zoning changes necessary to accommodate a Wal-Mart at Aspen Hill Road and Connecticut Avenue. The measure, called a [“minor master plan amendment,”](#) is designed to bypass broader master plan reviews that take many years to wend through the approval process. The minor amendment could return to the council for final consideration in late 2014.

Lee Development Group, which owns a vacant office building at the site, has an agreement with Wal-Mart to open a store if Lee can [secure the proper zoning](#). Business leaders in the eastern-county community have complained about the blight created by the building, which has been empty for three years. Lee says there is no market for its continued use as office space.

But the land-use discussion was overtaken by strong sentiments about Wal-Mart, which has lobbied heavily behind the scenes to establish the Aspen Hill location. Unionized Montgomery County employees, whose local is affiliated with [United Food and Commercial Workers](#), have campaigned vigorously against the plan.

The council’s vote came over the objections of two members who enjoy considerable labor support, George L. Leventhal (D-At Large) and Marc Elrich (D-At Large). They said Wal-Mart would place other Aspen Hill businesses, including a Kmart store and a Giant Food supermarket, at risk.

Leventhal said Wal-Mart’s sheer size allows it to underprice supermarket competitors at a loss “to further its anti-competitive goals.” He cited ads showing how a \$115.71 grocery bill at Giant would be just \$90.50 at Wal-Mart.

Elrich suggested that Giant run ads about what the county will have to pay in social services to support Wal-Mart employees who will not earn enough to sustain themselves in Montgomery.

Amanda Henneberg, a Wal-Mart spokeswoman, said the company can offer low prices because of its efficient supply chain and relationships with manufacturers. She added that the company was “proud of the competitive nature of our wages and benefits.”

But Erlich said his main opposition was to the idea of expediting zoning changes to cater to the needs of individual property owners.

Erlich and Leventhal proposed a broader study of the Aspen Hill retail community, estimating that it would extend the process by only eight months.

But other members said the council needed to be responsive to Aspen Hill residents, who have been vocal in their frustration over the abandoned office site.

“We need to deliver and to answer the call of the community,” said council member Craig Rice (D-Upcounty):

Voting for the planning department proposal were Rice, Roger Berliner (D-Potomac-Bethesda), Phil Andrews (D-Rockville-Gaithersburg), Nancy Navarro (D-Mid-County) and Nancy Floreen (D-At Large).

Against were Erlich, Leventhal, Valerie Ervin (D-Eastern County) and Hans Riemer (D-At Large).

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