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## Montgomery County Council members accuse planners of succumbing to Walmart pressure

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A proposal that would make it easier for Walmart to open a store in Aspen Hill sparked fierce debate among Montgomery County Council members Tuesday, with some accusing the county's Planning Board of catering to the big-box giant.

Councilmen George Leventhal and Marc Elrich, both at-large Democrats, said the board was succumbing to pressure by the property owner and the retailer to get a rezoning proposal for the site on Connecticut Avenue pushed through the council faster than normal.

The Planning Board has proposed rezoning a few properties around the county for the council to review in January 2015. If the proposal is rejected, the rezonings would have to wait until January 2017.

The new schedule will go in front of the council's Planning, Housing and Economic Development Committee later this month.

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Planning Board Chairwoman Francoise Carrier denied the charge that Walmart or the property's

current owner influenced the board's proposal.

Elrich and Leventhal argued that because the developer requested the rezoning for more density at the property and to change the current zoning from office to retail -- and the Planning Board accommodated a faster timeline for the changes -- the process was tainted.

The council chambers were packed with residents holding signs supporting the development. Leventhal accused supporters of receiving their signs from Walmart lobbyists.

"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?"

Supporters said they did not receive their signs from Walmart and were offended that Leventhal implied residents weren't capable of rallying themselves.

Boris Lander, 27, and Brendan Luis, 21, said the lack of business in the area has caused them to lay off employees at their doughnut shop. Leventhal's comments, Lander said, were "extremely disrespectful."

But Leventhal wasn't entirely wrong: Walmart provided transportation for about a dozen senior citizens from the nearby Leisure World senior complex, according to Ellen Bogage, president and CEO of Chesapeake Public Strategies, who was there representing the company. She said she didn't know where residents got their signs.

They weren't the only ones off put off by Leventhal and Elrich's remarks. Councilman Craig Rice, D-Germantown, gave an impassioned speech saying the community will be hurt if the council doesn't rezone the area quickly.

"We have a duty to make sure that we support processes that allow for things to move forward and in a manner in which you can expect in your lifetime to see something happen," he told the audience. "I see those signs. Let's move forward with this."

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