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Examiner Local Editorial: Montgomery's dilemma: Walmart or empty hulk?

May 2, 2013 | 9:00 pm

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The Washington Examiner

In the fairy tale world envisioned by certain members of the Montgomery County Council, the office building in Aspen Hill would be full of workers who biked to their high-paying jobs advancing various progressive causes, and then stopped after work to buy organic food from locally owned shops nearby.

In the real world, the BAE Systems building on Connecticut Avenue has been vacant for three years, and there is no sign of a new tenant on the horizon. Yet at-large County Council members George Leventhal and Marc Elrich oppose allowing the land underneath what neighbors call a "vacant eyesore" to be rezoned for retail use because Walmart wants to build a new store on the site.

The county's own Planning Board recommended expediting the tortuously slow process so that the zoning changes can at least be considered by 2015. But that's not good enough for Leventhal and Elrich, who hosted a rally Tuesday outside the Montgomery County Council Office Building in Rockville with labor union activists, including United Food and Commercial Workers Local 400, which have long objected to the giant retailer's nonunionized workforce.

But in a May 1 statement, Walmart spokeswoman Amanda Henneberg denied oft-repeated claims that Walmart does not treat its employees well. "Walmart wages and benefits typically meet or exceed those of the majority of our competitors, including union competitors."

Leventhal questioned how it was in the public interest to allow what his union allies refer to as Walmart's "predatory pricing" to kill off the struggling Kmart and Giant stores nearby. But if Walmart's lower prices would enable it to capture enough customers who currently shop at these other big-box stores to put them out of business, blocking Walmart from competing with them guarantees that Leventhal's constituents in Aspen Hill will wind up paying more for their basic necessities. How is that in the public interest?

Both Leventhal and Elrich have repeatedly voted for Montgomery County's increasingly predatory taxation policies, so their politically motivated stance against Walmart is not only contrary to county residents' best interests but hypocritical to boot.

When the world's largest retailer wants to take over a vacant building and bring jobs and low prices to a county with a growing population of low-income residents that has actively undermined its own commercial tax base, rolling up the welcome mat sends the wrong message to other businesses thinking about doing the same.