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Possible Aspen Hill Wal-Mart draws heat

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ROCKVILLE - Even debating whether or not to build a Wal-Mart in Aspen Hill brought about one of the most heated arguments in recent memory to the County Council this week.

Members of the Montgomery County Council engaged in a debate concerning the mini master plan for a development project in Aspen Hill which became so heated it caused one member of the council to call another one disrespectful.

The debate came after representatives from the county planning board made a semi-annual presentation of its master plan schedule to the county council. The planning board changed the schedule to remove minor master plans for Pooks Hill and added an amendment for Aspen Hill. More than 30 members of the Aspen Hill and Leisure World communities were in attendance and they came with signs printed with the phrase: "What's the wait? Give Aspen Hill a chance!"

The Aspen Hill plan centers around an office building on the corner of Aspen Hill Road and Connecticut Avenue owned by Lee Development Group which has been vacant since 2010. The development group, led by President Bruce Lee, owns several other properties in Aspen Hill and has looked to revitalize the area. Unable to find takers for a lease, Lee said he wants to have the property rezoned for retail since he believes Aspen Hill is a retail community. The property is currently zoned for office space and not retail.

Councilmember George Leventhal (at-large) said his concern with the mini master plan is there is an existing agreement between Lee's group and Wal-Mart to have Wal-Mart become the tenant for the property and build a store there. Leventhal said he is worried about the county council becoming susceptible to manipulation and lobbying by developers and corporations.

"There is no reason to mask this decision to expedite the agreement that has already been reached between Wal-Mart and the Lee Development Group as anything other than what it is—a request by the Lee Development Group to rezone its property to accommodate its existing agreement with Wal-Mart," Leventhal said. "It is not anything other than that. That seems to me to be a very specific recommendation, a very site-specific issue to come before us. I am not familiar with that. It has not happened before. What we have done now with this master plan process is change it significantly to deal with property owners' desire for urgent resolution of their profit-seeking ability. In the past that was not how the process worked."

Leventhal said the audience members holding signs were holding signs printed by consultants hired by the Lee Development Group and Wal-Mart. In fact, Lee said his group provided transportation to the county council meeting and the signs which were created by a consultant, Fontaine and Company. Fontaine and Company is run by Jamie Fontaine; a Baltimore resident who previously ran campaigns for U.S. Senator Ben Cardin. Lee said Wal-Mart did not pay for the signs or transportation.

"It is not uncommon (to provide signs and transportation)," Lee said. "We have been doing that for years for projects. We provided the signs, buttons and transportation for quite a few folks in Aspen Hill that do not have access to transportation. Some requests came in and I said, 'Sure. We'd be happy to provide transportation.' We had a bus show up at the Northgate Shopping Plaza and it worked out well."

Councilmember Craig Rice said he wanted to apologize for Leventhal's remarks because it is wrong to assume just because someone received a sign it means they were not expressing their own opinion.

“The assumption that somehow by you holding a sign that somebody might have given you means that you do not have a voice, that you do not have your own opinion, that you just happen to roll down the street and somebody said, ‘Hey take this sign’ and you come into the county council building because you do not have anything else to do is disrespectful,” Rice said.

Members of the Aspen Hill community who were in attendance, such as Aspen Hill Civic Association President Alexandra Minckler, said they did not show up to support Wal-Mart or any other company. She said the community wants the vacant lot to become something that could benefit Aspen Hill.

The community has been consistent in not advocating or opposing any tenant for the property, but being fully supportive of having the property rezoned for a realistic use.

“People want this property to not die on its own,” Minckler said.

Lee said for him the issue is not about Wal-Mart, it is about doing something economically viable for the area. Lee Development Group is attempting to revitalize the property and give the community what it wants, but he is fighting an uphill battle.

“It is very difficult to do business in Montgomery County,” Lee said. “It is a shame.