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Proposed Wal-mart site designed for unique tenant [by Kate S. Alexander](#) and [Lindsay A. Powers](#) Staff writers

From the street, the old Vitro building in Aspen Hill — now proposed for a Wal-mart — stands as a graying pillar to a once thriving campus where private industry drove government progress.

It has been almost three years since government contractor BAE Systems downsized, pulling up its roots from the building at the corner of Aspen Hill Road and Connecticut Avenue.

Now, except for the Montgomery County Police who frequently swarm it to train, the facility remains vacant.

From the outside, it appears to be a simple rectangle, wrapped in acres of surface parking.

But inside, its stained carpets show where a labyrinth of cubicles once filled its upper floors. Its halls contain tiny doors behind which rooms for telecommunication equipment hide. Its cavernous basement is carved into more rooms, some with raised floors, the foundation of a secretive shell where once critical business once thrived.

Lee Development Group specifically constructed the building for Vitro — a government contractor — in 1968, said Bruce Lee, president of Lee Development Group, which owns the building.

A government contractor that worked on projects such as the Trident submarine missile system, Lee said, Vitro and later BAE kept the facility outfitted with state-of-the-art technology and security.

Property manager Gary Cranford said the building was well maintained, but today, it is years behind Montgomery County building code standards. It is so unusual, turning the approximately 264,000-square-foot building into a new use would cost more than razing it and starting fresh, Lee said.

The building sits on a larger campus that was partially rezoned to retail use when the Aspen Hill Master Plan last was under consideration in 1994.

The Vitro property, which was then under a 20-year lease, was not included in the rezoning.

“In hindsight, I should have said, ‘You know what — let’s carry the zoning all the way across, treat the whole campus as one,’” Lee said.

Lee said his company worked to find a new tenant for the building since even before BAE System vacated in June 2010 but was unsuccessful.

Carving the building for multiple tenants or bringing the building up to code to make it viable under current zoning would trigger extensive work and costs in a market that has all but stagnated, Lee said.

“It doesn’t benefit anyone in the community,” Lee said. “It certainly doesn’t benefit us.”

So Lee looked elsewhere.

About four years ago, Costco entered the scene as a potential tenant but would ultimately walk away from the project after the county offered them about \$4 million to locate in Wheaton, Lee said.

[Wal-mart signed a letter of intent to move to the site](#), originally aiming to be there in 2013, but to do so, the site must be rezoned and the building demolished.

Lee Development Group currently is seeking to rezone and bring a Wal-mart to the area.

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