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Wal-Mart shelves plans for Aspen Hill site *by [Kevin James Shay](#) Staff writer*

Wal-Mart Stores has withdrawn plans to open a 118,000-square-foot store in Aspen Hill because of the “uncertain length” of Montgomery County’s planning and regulatory processes, the developer of the site said Tuesday.

More than two years ago, Wal-Mart expressed interest in opening a 300-employee store at Aspen Hill Road and Connecticut Avenue, said Bruce H. Lee, president of Silver Spring-based Lee Development Group, the developer. The land has had a vacant 263,000-square-foot building, built in 1968, since defense and aerospace contractor BAE Systems moved out in 2010.

“Lately, they have been growing quite frustrated with the length of the process,” Lee said of Wal-Mart. “I can’t really blame them for taking a step back and focusing on other projects. We are still trying to get approval for rezoning to retail. If we get that, it could be several years after that before shovels are actually put in the ground.”

Wal-Mart spokesman Bill Wertz confirmed in an email that the company decided not to pursue the Aspen Hill project.

“We will continue to look for new opportunities to serve customers in the area,” Wertz said. “With our recent store expansion and renovation in Germantown, as well as our new store on Georgia Ave. in Washington, D.C., we have the ability to serve Montgomery County residents effectively from these locations.”

The County Council last year voted to expedite zoning review of the former BAE site in a minor master plan amendment process. A public hearing on that amendment is slated for Sept. 11 during a Planning Board meeting at 8787 Georgia Ave. in Silver Spring. The County Council could consider the rezoning early next year.

Gwen Wright, director of the Montgomery County Planning Department, said in an email that the master plan amendment is being done at “a very fast pace — 12 to 18 months total.” There have been three major public meetings and smaller community meetings. The Planning Department has not endorsed one user for the site, and there were “significant” concerns from residents and others for and against opening a Wal-Mart in Aspen Hill, she said.

“It was never all about zoning the property for Wal-Mart,” Wright said.

The county’s zoning code makes “combination retail” uses conditional, requiring a hearing examiner’s review and approval, she said.

County planners recommended that the former BAE site be rezoned for a mix of commercial and residential uses. But Lee, whose company attracted a Kohl’s Department Store to Aspen Hill in 2012, said retail is the most viable use.

He started looking for an office use years before BAE moved and found no takers.

“Once the property is zoned appropriately for retail use, we expect strong interest from retailers looking to come to Aspen Hill,” Lee said.

Boris Lander, co-president of the Aspen Hill Business Coalition and owner of nearby Dunkin’ Donuts locations, was disappointed Wal-Mart withdrew its plans.

“Our organization will continue to work to urge a rezoning of the property in order to help local businesses and to revitalize our community by providing the opportunity to bring in a major retailer and present more shopping choices,” Lander said in a statement.

This year, some residents formed Aspen Hill Homeowners, opposing a Wal-Mart or other big-box store at that site due to traffic and other concerns. The Aspen Hill Civic Association, which formed around 1980, supports rezoning the site, though it is not advocating for a specific tenant use and did not openly oppose Wal-Mart.

The former BAE building was first occupied by Vitro Corp., which started in the 1950s as a manufacturing company of mostly slide transparencies for overhead projectors and became part of BAE. Vitro once had two other buildings in a campus there, but those two were torn down in the 1990s to make way for Home Depot.