

Silver Spring Patch

Walmart Drops Plans to Build in Aspen Hill

With Montgomery County's complicated and multi-year process for approving zoning plans, the nation's largest retailer says it won't build.

By [Deb Belt \(Editor\)](#) Updated August 12, 2014 at 4:32 pm

From [Montgomery Community Media](#):

Walmart has scrapped its plans to build a store in Aspen Hill.

The company had been looking to open a 118,000-square-foot store with expanded grocery offerings at the site that would have employed 300 people.

“I can confirm that Walmart has decided not to move forward with the Aspen Hill project,” said Walmart spokesman William Wertz. “We will continue to look for new opportunities to serve customers in the area. However, at this time, 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. Our decision was based purely on business considerations and uncertainty about the length of Montgomery County’s zoning process.”

The nearly 10-acre Aspen Hill property includes a 262,000 square-foot office building once occupied by BAE Systems and its 1,000 employees. The building has been vacant since 2010.

“Unfortunately to their credit they hung in there a couple years and we are still looking at several more years to get all approvals for rezoning,” said Bruce Lee, president of Silver Spring-based Lee Development Group which owns the site. “All retailers really want certainty. No retailer wants to get involved in a long schedule and Montgomery County approval times take a long time especially when you throw in a rezoning.”

The site at Aspen Hill Road and Connecticut Avenue is zoned for office use and is in the midst of the county’s minor master plan amendment process in an attempt to rezone the property for retail use. That minor master plan amendment is ironically the county’s fast track way to get properties rezoned out of sequence from the master plan amendment process. Lee said the rezoning is expected to be completed mid-2015 but that other planning approvals for the site could take an additional three years.

That’s too long a wait for Walmart, Lee said.

“My opinion continues to be we need to improve the processes and find ways to shorten time frames so we can encourage businesses to come to Montgomery County,” Lee said.

A new county report from the Office of Legislative Oversight examined the review and approval timeframes for preliminary plans, site plans and record plats for development projects in Montgomery County. The report found that certain projects that are required to go through all stages of the review process could take more than three years to gain approval. It also states that the median processing timeframes for new preliminary plans, new site plans and record plats exceed the limited timeframe guidelines or assumptions that exist in county law or are published in agency documents.

Lee's company pays about \$500,000 a year in taxes, utility fees and insurance costs for the property. So far that's \$2.5 million in expenditures while the property sits vacant.

Across the street at the Northgate Shopping Plaza, thanks to a \$14 million renovation, Lee said that development is thriving.

"We are confident that this is a great retail location, ultimately offering much-needed shopping options to the under-served Aspen Hill community," Lee said. "Once the property is zoned appropriately for retail use, we expect strong interest from retailers looking to come to Aspen Hill."

County planners have recommended that the BAE/Vitro property be re-zoned as a Commercial/ Residential Town Zone, allowing for a mix of commercial and residential uses. Based on the economic analysis performed by staff for the Minor Master Plan Amendment, retail is the most viable use for the site in the near term, and would be allowed under this zone.

"On behalf of the Aspen Hill Business Coalition, I'd like to express our utmost disappointment with the news that Walmart is withdrawing their plans for the BAE/Vitro site," said Boris Lander, co-president of the organization. "After working diligently for two years, 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."

Plans for retail at the property have received support from Leisure World residents and from community groups like the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Montgomery County, the Aspen Hill Business Coalition and the Aspen Hill Civic Association. Opponents of the plan however had argued traffic concerns.

The Montgomery County Planning Board's public hearing on the Aspen Hill Minor Master Plan Amendment is scheduled for 6 p.m. Sept. 1