

The Washington Post

Montgomery County's Wal-Mart test

By [Editorial Board](#), Published: May 31

IN THE contest among big suburban localities to attract businesses and jobs, Montgomery County has long played a distant Avis to Fairfax County's Hertz. Except Montgomery hasn't tried harder.

Now the county faces what may become a major test of its business climate: a bid by Wal-Mart to open a store about five miles north of the Beltway in the Aspen Hill-Wheaton area. The brewing [debate](#), which is likely to reach the County Council for a decision early next year, already features some of the familiar elements from fights over the arrival of Wal-Marts in communities elsewhere. Skeptics attack the retail giant as a bad employer, a killer of traditional mom-and-pop stores, a generator of traffic and a poor corporate citizen.

Yet on one point the skeptics are mostly silent, because there is no real rebuttal: Huge numbers of people like to shop at Wal-Mart because it saves them money.

The site Wal-Mart is eyeing in Montgomery is ripe for rezoning: a 10-acre plot on Connecticut Avenue occupied by a large office building that was abandoned four years ago and has been vacant ever since. In front of it, a parking lot sits empty. The property's owner, Lee Development Group, has tried to find tenants for the building, to no avail; lacking nearby Metro access, the site is no longer attractive for office use.

When Wal-Mart is involved, zoning battles quickly veer into arguments about social justice and the character of communities. Labor unions in Montgomery especially have organized to block Wal-Mart, which is famous, or notorious, for its anti-union policies.

But the county's recent move to establish [its own hourly minimum wage](#), and raise it by 2017 to \$11.50, far above the federal level, should blunt the usual criticism that jobs at Wal-Mart don't pay a living wage. And while Wal-Mart's rock-bottom prices may indeed pose a competitive threat to a nearby Giant grocery store, it's hard to see how that would be anything but a boon to consumers.

The argument that the store in Aspen Hill would overburden the local roads also looks flimsy: County officials concede that the existing office building, were it full, would generate far more rush-hour traffic than would a store along the lines Wal-Mart is proposing. And it's worth noting that dozens of small local businesses have supported rezoning the site to allow Wal-Mart to move in.

No doubt the fight over the site would have a different cast had a more upscale retailer, such as Nordstrom, proposed a store of the same size. But the debate isn't between Wal-Mart and Nordstrom. It is, or should be, about whether the site in question — an under-utilized eyesore in the midst of a heavily populated area — is appropriate for retail. If county planners decide that it is, then why would the council block a project that would so clearly benefit so many of their constituents?