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by Steve Krulick, Village of Ellenville Trustee

Suggestions Re the Big-Box

"Illusions abound in big business, but the biggest tooth fairy of all is the assertion that megalithic corporations save us money."

~ Paul Hawken, *The Ecology of Commerce*

(Attention Shoppers! We're interrupting regularly-scheduled programming for this red-light special!)

So, the Napanoch Mall site is being considered as the location for a new Wal-Mart Supercenter.

We likely all agree that it was great to have a Jamesway/Ames-sized store locally (not to mention Richie's, Rothkopf's, or Woolworth's), so that we didn't have to drive 30 miles to Kingston, Middletown, or Newburgh just to buy underwear or toasters; and their closures were hard on many local consumers. But is one giant "big-box" store the answer? What has been the experience of other communities where Wal-Marts (or similar big-box stores) have moved in? What did the communities gain; what did they lose? Why did so many communities fight to keep the big boxes OUT? What can we learn from them?

How can we generate and support locally-grown businesses that have real commitments to the community, and that keep the majority of revenues ploughed back into the community, as opposed to non-local big boxes that put only 10% or less back?

As a local official, and someone interested in how we build and energize community economies from locally-based roots, I am concerned this project will tear apart our community, no matter the outcome. There will be some who stand to gain from this, and some who stand to lose. Some see this as a source of jobs, tax revenue, and more shopping choices; others see this as a neo-colonial bomb that will destroy long-standing local family businesses, drain municipal resources, and diminish quality-of-life features of our community. I foresee neighbors coming to blows over this, and local officials having to make the decision of their lives, as threats, bribes, and conflicts of interest overwhelm common sense and good public policy.

If you think the brief casino dust-up was traumatic, get a grip, folks... No matter the outcome, we will NEVER be the same after this!

It is critical that we begin to look at this with clear and open eyes, before the seductive publicity machine that Wal-Mart megabucks can bring to bear spreads its flag-draped, apple-pie visions over us like a warm blanket. We need to learn all we can, ask the right questions, and debate this vigorously. We need to get input from other communities that have been down this road before us, to learn from their lessons. We need to consider alternatives to big-box-salvation that are more community-friendly.

Fortunately, there ARE successful local models that WORK and are more beneficial in the short *and* long

term than seeking out one 8000-pound Tyrannosaur to pin all our hopes on. There are books, films, and online sites for those who want to stay informed, vigilant, and empowered rather than feel helpless before a "Resistance is futile!" Borg onslaught.

I hope that various local organizations will get involved, and bring this issue before their members to DISCUSS and REVIEW the situation... NOT with minds closed, but so that the TRUTH is revealed through research and honest debate, and so that we – as we did concerning the casino and the hospital – can speak as a community with ONE VOICE, in support and protection of OUR broader community interests, and NOT the interests of the few and narrow.

In addition to serving on the Ellenville Village Board, where my highest responsibility is to the safety and well-being of all its citizens, I am on the board of Sustainable Hudson Valley, a group dedicated to fostering models of community-based economics that focus on local needs and resources, and this group has many resources we can draw on. This is not a NIMBY group, but one that can act as honest broker to present choices and options, and bring in knowledgeable experts to help set up meaningful dialogs and moderate the debate to minimize the negative fallout and acrimony I fear may develop as passions run high.

I will start the information process by re-showing SHV'S copy of "Independent America," free, at 7:00 PM, Dec. 4th, at the Library's Community Room. Wal-Mart is only one small part of the film; mostly, it shows the ways communities can withstand pressure from various retail giants, while growing and nurturing local businesses, taking back their economic destiny through creativity and by working together.

If you have a reasonably fast web connection, you can watch "Wal-Mart – High Cost of Low Prices" for free; go to Google Video and search for "walmart high cost"; several bonus excerpts are also available.

This 97-minute documentary shows how Wal-Mart decimates communities, ruins the environment, eats up local revenues, promotes sweatshop labor here and abroad, brings down local wages, practices racial and gender discrimination, and leaves a wake of destroyed local businesses behind them, often before moving on to the neighboring next victim town, leaving the empty shell of a building too large for any other replacement to take over. Yeah, it's pretty one-sided, but then again, so will be Wal-Mart's slick and high-powered pitch. You're gonna be hit with the latter, so why not get inoculated? Much of the vaccine comes from former Wal-Mart executives and operatives who could no longer serve their rapacious master in good conscience.

(In two weeks I'll pick up where I left off two weeks ago, with some examples of *accepted* suggestions.)

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