

THE AGE OF THE RETAIL BEHEMOTH

BY EDDIE FARAH



When it comes to shopping, we Americans mean business. We

live for sales and thrive on savvy purchases. We are also all about convenience so "One stop shopping" seems to have become our preferred procurement method these days. This has necessitated the age of Super Centers. The standard department store just doesn't cut it anymore. We have supported these stores so much that they seem to think that every little neighborhood in every city across the country would give their eyeteeth to have one. Wal-Mart has wasted no time stepping up to the plate.

Decisions are currently being made in Hong Kong that could cause serious damage to the World Trade Organization services agreement that controls the growth of such retail behemoths. The land-use decisions regarding size limitation, hours and working conditions at Wal-Mart and other big-box stores are serious threats to the authority of state and local governments.

But that's nothing new. In 2002, Wal-Mart began urging the Bush administration for new laws and guidelines that would force member countries of the WTO to remove size limitations and geographic limitations on stores and their locations. Wal-Mart does not want to have to comply with local rules and regulations, and it certainly does not want to face the prospect that more and more communities will reject its plans altogether.

The sad truth in all of this is that communities have in fact started protesting the expansion of Wal-Mart in their neighborhoods. So the corporation spends tens of millions of dollars every year fighting to win approval for its new stores. In the end, this creates unfair competition for locally owned shops and totally

undermines the vitality of downtowns. It also makes for low wages and the importation of products from overseas that are sold in their stores. Wal-Mart feels justified in its mission of progress at any cost because every time they win, their parking lot is miraculously full, despite the communities' earlier voices of rejection.

I understand that convenience and low prices are tough temptations to resist and I am certainly not saying that it is wrong to ever shop at Wal-Mart. There is, however, one major thing to keep in mind: Your community is just that - *your community*. So it's up to you whether or not you're going to allow any major corporation to move in and possibly change the

landscape forever, because once you give an inch, you need to be prepared that a mile might be taken. Should you decide that you want to preserve the integrity of your community, then you need to lobby the U.S. government because, as of now, the Bush administration and its trade negotiators are doing Wal-Mart's bidding. If this is allowed to continue, then communi-

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ties across the United States will not lose only the ability to regulate or reject Wal-Mart, they could lose the ability to negotiate standards. These include size and height restrictions, laws regulating the preservation of cultural and historic sites, environmental protections and limits on hours of operation, as well as wages paid. There is still time to set some basic rules for the Wal-Marts of the world before American Main Streets start to disappear.-EF

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