

Passions run high at Walmart hearing

Traffic concerns:

A crowd filled City Hall as traffic engineers presented conflicting findings on the expected volume of vehicles.

By **MARK HAYWARD**

New Hampshire Union Leader, December 1, 2010

MANCHESTER — Residents and business owners crowded into City Hall Tuesday night to urge the Planning Board to reject a Walmart Supercenter on Gold Street, faulting the retail giant's assertions that it could fix any traffic problems caused by the thousands of additional shoppers in the area.

During a four-hour public hearing, traffic engineers disputed each other's findings, residents predicted gridlock in south Manchester, and the board chairman warned one resident who used foul language.

Most speakers said the site of the former Associated Grocers warehouse was the wrong spot for an 188,000-square-foot store predicted to add 8,600 cars to the South Willow Street area on a busy Saturday.

"This is an invasion and destruction of a neighborhood. There isn't one street in this neighborhood that can handle 6,000 cars a day," said Ward 9 Alderman Barbara Shaw. Some 650 have signed a petition opposing the Walmart site, and dozens packed City Hall last night.

But Walmart said its traffic plan to widen a South Willow Street intersection and gate several residential streets would improve traffic.

Walmart lawyer Susan Duprey said Walmart wants its customers to arrive and leave the store easily and not sit in traffic jams.

"We care just as much as everybody else does that the traffic in the area works," Duprey said.

Board member Robert Martel, who chaired the hearing, said the board will decide the issue at a future meeting. The board did not call for an independent traffic analysis as urged by Hannaford Brothers, which successfully blocked the Walmart project in court.

In October, a Superior Court judge sided with Hannaford and faulted the planning board for not allowing the neighboring supermarket to comment on the final traffic plan. Tuesday's hearing provided that opportunity.

Hannaford traffic experts raised several issues with the Walmart traffic analysis: • The analysis does not consider the impact on the intersections for Interstate 293 ramps with South Willow Street. Hannaford warned that the state will force traffic signals to remain green to clear highway backups, which will cause traffic on South Willow Street to stand still.

- Walmart's base numbers for South Willow Street traffic were significantly lower than those used by Lowe's when it built a store on nearby Huse Road.
- Walmart did not calculate the effect that street closures would have on South Willow Street. Nor did it consider what would happen if President Road is eventually gated, said Bob Duval, an engineer hired by Hannaford.

Hannaford used a software system to make predictions that showed significant backups throughout South Willow Street because of Walmart.

"I don't think an alternative can be devised, it's pretty much at capacity now," Duval said.

Walmart's traffic engineer, Jaffrey Dirk, dismissed the concerns and said the software used by Hannaford was not designed for traffic planning.

Walmart plans call for adding additional lanes at South Willow Street and John E. Devine Drive and gating all residential streets to the west of the site except President Road. The road, home to both residences and industrial uses, would route about 20 percent of the traffic to Walmart.

Walmart said the 30-footwide road has capacity to handle an increase of 6,600 cars a day, more than four times its current traffic.



Residents filled Manchester City Hall Tuesday night to urge the Planning Board to reject a Walmart Supercenter on Gold Street.

MARK HAYWARD/UNION LEADER