

grassroots editor



*A journal
for newspeople*

**Published by the
International Society
of Weekly Newspaper Editors**

**The impact of big-box
stores on communities and
community newspapers:
*Differing perspectives from
editors and publishers***

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Welcome to this special issue of *Grassroots Editor* focusing on the impact of big-box stores on communities and community newspapers. The topic was recommended by the board of directors of the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors, and seven ISWNE members responded by submitting articles.

Wal-Mart is the most visible megastore in America, but others mentioned in this issue include Fred Meyer, Pamida, Target, and Home Depot. Two of our writers come down on the side of Wal-Mart — one who enjoys the store's low prices and another who laments the fact that sales tax revenue is leaving his county because it doesn't have a Wal-Mart. Two other writers, while critical of Wal-Mart, point out that the company allows their newspapers to place racks inside and outside the store, resulting in their largest single-copy sales location.

To be sure, there is plenty to dislike about Wal-Mart and other big-box stores. The other writers in this issue do a thorough job of explaining how the goliath is not a good corporate neighbor, how it brings about the decimation of local downtown merchants, how it hires as many part-time employees as possible in order to avoid paying health insurance or retirement benefits, and how it strong-arms its suppliers.

Wal-Mart was given the opportunity to present its side of the story, but chose not to submit an article for this issue.

— Chad Stebbins, Editor

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Yes, it really *is* about Wal-Mart

By Jim Painter

Big-box stores pose a good news-bad news dilemma for many small cities and towns.

The good news is they can add enormous amounts of sales-tax revenue to the town's coffers; they provide local consumers with low prices on common items everyone needs; and they offer employment opportunities.

The bad news is that in many cases (at least in the part of the country where I work), city councils offer big-box retailers enormous tax incentives to build in their communities, pretty much diluting the benefits of Good News Item No. 1 listed above; they often create municipal infrastructure and traffic nightmares; they're architectural eyesores; they often drive smaller shops out of business; and the employment opportunities they provide are usually of the bottom-of-the-pay-scale variety.

While many struggling small towns might benefit to some degree from a new big box in the community, small-town newspapers frequently get their noses ground into the dust when the big boys — especially Wal-Mart — come to town.

Wal-Mart traditionally doesn't advertise in community newspapers (although protests by the National Newspaper Association might be making the company rethink that policy). However, the retail giant still manages to get its name published in community papers in a positive way. By giving a \$100 scholarship to a local high school student, Wal-Mart can get twice that amount or more in "free" advertising when the paper dutifully reports Wal-Mart's donation. The local newspaper editor can either not print the announcement, thus denying the publicity to a deserving local youth, or buckle under to Wal-Mart's cynical method of boosting its own name recognition and reputation without supporting the local newspaper. In other words, Wal-Mart lets the local news paper pay for its advertising.

Not a good neighbor

I'm lucky to be the managing editor of a community newspaper in one of the fastest-growing areas of the country. The *West Valley View* is based in Litchfield Park, Ariz., but it also covers four other small-but-growing cities in the Phoenix metro area. One of those cities, Buckeye, was a rural town with a population of about 8,000 just six or seven years ago. Today, it's home to 35,000 or 40,000 (it's hard to get an accurate count anymore), and in the next two decades, it's expected to swell to half a million. With all that growth, Buckeye and its neighboring cities are as attractive to big-box retailers as a lost housecat is to a hungry coyote.

Over the past two years, it's been hard to attend a planning and zoning commission meeting without hearing about another Wal-Mart Supercenter proposal. The big boys want to come to town and the local elected leaders are fawning over them like lovesick sophomores. Neighboring cities try to outdo each other in how many economic incentives they can offer Wal-Mart to build here rather than there.

But the *View* has editorially opposed every single Wal-Mart plan. Why? That's a question many of our readers keep asking.

Many readers' letters to the *View* have praised Wal-Mart for its low prices and large variety of products and questioned why anyone would not want one in their community.

The answer is simple: Wal-Mart is not a good corporate neighbor.

Wal-Mart is the company above all others that is blamed for the decimation of local downtown merchants in small towns across North America. Wal-Mart's business philosophy has already ruined many small American towns. Among the many Web sites and publications that chronicle the corporation's business practices is *How Wal-Mart is Destroying America (and the World)*, by Bill Quinn, in which the author documents the way Wal-Mart opens stores in several small towns in the same region and offers lower prices than the small ma and pa businesses can, forcing those busi-

nesses to close. After a while, Wal-Mart consolidates its multiple stores in the region, thus eliminating sales-tax revenue for all but one of the towns (unless that town gives the corporation new tax incentives to keep the only remaining store, and then none of the towns receives sales tax). The other towns are left with closed, old, established stores as well as a huge empty Wal-Mart. Gone are the local merchants who were the town leaders and supported all the non-profit, school, church and Little League functions.

In addition to being the low-cost leader, Wal-Mart is the low-pay leader. Wal-Mart pays minimum wage wherever possible and hires as many part-time employees as possible. Those employees don't receive benefits such as health insurance or retirement benefits. Wal-Mart has also been accused of asking employees to work additional hours off the clock to avoid overtime pay, has been accused of limiting the number of women managers and of knowingly using subcontractors whose employees are undocumented aliens to clean the stores. Wal-Mart counsels its employees on how to access government health resources.

Wal-Mart is the leader in strong-arming its suppliers. The 500-pound gorilla of retailing can and does make demands on suppliers that virtually no other customer does. Wal-Mart demands that the suppliers lock in contract prices regardless of material costs, demands that suppliers warehouse goods, deliver on demand with tight schedules, install special software to interface with Wal-Mart ordering procedures. The alternatives are to not be a supplier to the world's largest retailer. Failures of these suppliers have been attributed to their dealings with Wal-Mart.

To keep wages low, Wal-Mart works to keep unions out. A store in Canada closed after "successfully" unionizing, although Wal-Mart never acknowledged that was the reason.

Learning the hard way

When Wal-Mart converted its local Avondale store to a superstore, the plans were in the city's planning department.

However, when a *View* reporter asked the store manager about the plan, the reporter was told the store wasn't going to be a superstore. Apparently, neither the local store manager nor Wal-Mart corporate headquarters was proud of that fact. But declining to comment is preferable to lying about it. One should be leery of trusting the comments of Wal-Mart executives.

When the current Avondale supercenter was built about eight years ago, the city wrote off huge amounts of sales-tax revenue in order to encourage Wal-Mart to build in the city. It's a decision the current city manager regrets, he recently told me. It will be years before the city sees any financial benefit from having the supercenter here. In the meantime, the store has become a filthy eyesore and a magnet for petty crime, which costs the city even more money to police.

Last July, the Avondale Wal-Mart was named in a consumer fraud lawsuit filed by the Arizona Attorney General's Office charging that the company fleeced customers by misrepresenting product prices.

"Not only have they been defrauding consumers, but they've ignored repeated requests to fix the problem," said Andrea Esquer of the Attorney General's Office. "You can say, 'Well, it's only a few cents or a few dollars here and there,'" but when you look at how many customers these stores serve, especially Wal-Mart, that money really adds up."

Since 2001, investigators from the Arizona Department of Weights and Measures conducted 976 inspections at various Arizona Wal-Mart outlets. The

retail giant was given a failing grade for 526, or 54 percent, of those inspections. The Avondale Wal-Mart accounted for nine of those failed inspections, according to the lawsuit.

Two years ago, Wal-Mart approached the city with a plan for a second supercenter two miles from the first. However, the company required a zoning change to make it happen. The city, having learned a hard lesson, rejected the rezoning. But that didn't stop Wal-Mart. It simply moved its plans to a parcel that's already properly zoned for that type of business. Avondale no longer has any legal reason to prevent a Wal-Mart from being built in what it had hoped would be the new upscale gateway to the city.

Newspapers' responsibility

While a city council can't legally reject a company simply because of its reputation, to oppose Wal-Mart is to oppose a specific social blight on America — no, make that a social blight on the world. This is a corporation whose business practices are reducing the quality of life not only for many Americans, but also for the factory workers in other parts of the world who make the cheap products Wal-Mart sells to Americans for its famous low prices.

Wal-Mart apologists no doubt will argue that the mega-retailer isn't the only major American corporation that exploits menial laborers in the backwaters of the world (as well as its own American employees). However, Wal-Mart is by far the biggest and most powerful of the exploiters. It's so big it sets the standard

that other retailers must follow if they want to survive.

A century ago, a social movement was spawned by Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle*, which exposed the atrocious working conditions and unsanitary practices of the meatpacking industry in Chicago. Because of that book, President Theodore Roosevelt called for the creation of the precursor of the Food and Drug Administration, and today, American consumers can feel confident that the meat they buy is safe to eat (even if it might cost a little more than it would have if *The Jungle* had never been written).

In some ways, Wal-Mart is like the meatpacking industry of the early 1900s — a company whose business practices, while enabling low costs to consumers, contributes to the weakening of the economic, social and ethical health of the nation.

Although city councils can't reject Wal-Mart simply because of the company's widely criticized business practices, the people who elect them have no such constraints.

Newspapers, especially community newspapers, which have much more at stake than their big-city counterparts, have a moral obligation to point out over and over again that Wal-Mart's business model is unacceptable. Their very survival might depend on it.

Jim Painter is managing editor of the West Valley View in Litchfield Park, Ariz. He can be contacted at editor@westvalleyview.com.

Old-fashioned service is key to success

By Robert M. Williams, Jr.

The question seemed as natural to her as taking a breath.

My friend's wide-eyed question just popped out after I casually mentioned that I've not shopped our nearby Wal-Mart in several years. "How do you find what you need without going to Wal-Mart?" she asked, obviously astonished at my disclosure.

It's quite easy, was my response. America's largest retailer does many things well, but it does nothing better than conveying the impression that (1) they sell everything cheaper and (2) that they carry any and everything you need. They are masters at marketing, convincing millions that perception is reality.

Truth is, Wal-Mart does offer many outstanding values, but they don't "always" have the lowest price as their commercials brag. And while it might be difficult to find the volume of selections Mr. Sam's giant store offers in other small town venues, it is possible to find virtually every brand-name elsewhere — and sometimes at a comparable, or even lower price. One of the problems, however, is that too few consumers seem to believe that.

So-called "big-box stores" out-market small-town independent retailers by creating the ultimate mind-set for their shoppers: no need even to look for best quality, selection or price at home. We've all heard anecdotes about women who "shopped all over" the nearest big city only to come back and find the just-right item awaiting them at home. But how many these days

bother to look at home first?

That's not as much fun.

In our shopaholic society, spending money has become entertainment. How many small-town banks rent buses to carry their seniors clubs on out-of-town holiday shopping sprees? Wives get up a carload to spend the day at faraway malls, abandoning hometown stores.

Hometown merchants aren't blameless for this exodus (and neither are our newspapers.) Shop-at-home campaigns and collective promotions among small-town merchants are about as easy as herding those proverbial cats. Many merchants seem to have given up.

Local retailers are at an obvious disadvantage with marketing budgets, but many fail to point out significant differences in shopping experience they can offer. Most tout their personal service, which is vital, but too few go one step farther. Another important advantage many small-town merchants offer is the same one that has given rise to one of America's greatest commercial expansions in recent years: convenience. If you consider your time valuable, as most of us certainly do, then big-box retailers fail the savings test in that category big-time. You need plenty of free time if you want to shop most of the megastores, especially Wal-Mart. They may offer acres of items but convenience and service are the last thing you will find. Searching the mile-long aisles for your particular brand of whatever can feel like seeking the proverbial needle in a stack of hay spread over 100,000+ square feet.

The clerks are generally friendly — if you can find them. Part of the "savings"

you supposedly enable by allowing the company to "keep costs down" is giving up any semblance of real service. My last visit to Wally World (in a distant town while traveling) left me disgusted after 20 minutes spent searching for what I wanted. I left after separate clerks vaguely waved me toward opposite directions to find my needed item. If they didn't know where the store kept items, there sure was no use in me wasting my time looking any further.

Though Wal-Mart and other megastores are packed to the rafters during the holidays, I still like the kind of service where my gifts are wrapped for me — at no extra charge. Where the cashier looks me in the eye and smiles when she hands my package over.

Where do I find such great service today?

It's right here at home. If you haven't found it yet, you haven't looked hard at all. Hometown local merchants still offer that old-fashioned key to retail success that no big-box store can touch: genuine service. My question back to my friend was just as natural: "How do you find what you need quickly, and get it wrapped beautifully, without going to our locally-owned stores?"

Robert M. Williams, Jr. publishes weekly newspapers in Blackshear, Alma, Ocilla and McRae, Ga. His commentaries can be heard on Georgia Public Radio. He can be contacted at rwilliams@theblacksheartimes.com.

Newspapers not part of the Wal-Mart mix

By Mike Moore

Wal-Mart.

The mere mention of the name conjures up images of bustling aisles full of shoppers looking for everyday products.

However, to Dave Eldridge, publisher of *The Jessamine Journal*, his images of the chain store aren't typical.

"My take on Wal-Mart is they're all about take and very little give," he said. "I think they realize their position is very strong without advertising in newspapers. I don't think they realize the upside to newspaper advertising."

This wasn't always the case, locally.

Many years ago, the Nicholasville store, which has been open since 1988, advertised in the pages of the *Journal*.

"Oh, they used to a couple managers ago," Eldridge said. "They'd run a full page ad with us a couple times a month, sometimes every week."

Through those ads, the *Journal* made about \$600 to \$700 in a given week.

"You never could count on it," Eldridge added. "They'd go in spurts. They'd run two or three months and go two or three months without running an ad."

Eldridge, who has been the newspaper's publisher since 1997, doesn't fault the local management, saying they're just following orders.

"The decision comes down from the great Wal-Mart throne on high," he quipped. "The last ad they ran with us was maybe four years ago."

Nicholasville Wal-Mart Manager Sherry Bryant, who has been employed with the chain for 24 years, said there is little say local managers have when it comes to advertising in general.

"They took a lot of that out of our hands several years ago," she said. "They'll occasionally run a few ads, maybe seasonal."

Eldridge added that toward the end, Wal-Mart's ad size and frequency dwindled down considerably.

"Newspapers aren't part of the mix, and they're (corporate Wal-Mart) not willing to give it an effective test," Eldridge added.

Despite the lack of advertising, the newspaper and the store still partner on a few things.

"We do one thing with them every year," Eldridge said. "That's our Easter Basket promotion."

Every spring, the newspaper buys 30 to 35 discounted baskets from the store.

"They give us \$25-\$30 baskets for \$15," said Peggy Adkins, *Journal* advertising representative. "We load the baskets with everything from stuffed animals, coloring books, and candy. They're unisex, so they're good for both boys and girls."

The paper also partners with 30 to 35 area businesses, with each location holding

a drawing for that businesses' winner.

Though she has only been at the Nicholasville location since May 2006, Bryant said the relationship between the local store and the newspaper has been positive.

"I have never had any issues with the newspaper," she said. "The vendors who drop off and pick up the newspaper are very nice. At my store in Richmond (Ky.) before I transferred here, we had a great relationship with the *Richmond Register*."

Wal-Mart is also the location of six *Journal* racks, four inside and two outside, Eldridge said. Those racks generate about \$175 of revenue per week, he said.

"We've been selling at Wal-Mart since they've been here," Eldridge said. "We've been inside Wal-Mart for about six years."

Editorial-wise, the store and the newspaper has had very little to do with each other over the years.

"I don't recall that they've ever asked us to come down and take pictures of their check presentations or anything like that," Eldridge said.

Mike Moore is editor of The Jessamine Journal in Nicholasville, Ky. In the interest of full disclosure, he has a cousin employed at the Nicholasville Wal-Mart store. Moore can be contacted at mmoore@jessamine-journal.com.

Wal-Mart a visible manifestation of a larger issue

By Suzanne Dean

The 109,000-square-foot Wal-Mart store that opened six years ago in Ephraim, Utah, has, on balance, been more positive than negative for Sanpete County, a county of about 25,000 located 120 miles south of Salt Lake City.

But that result probably has more to do with local factors than with Wal-Mart.

Wal-Mart has damaged local grocery, hardware and clothing stores, to be sure. But I don't know of any business that has closed because of Wal-Mart.

That's probably because Sanpete County, which is one county south of the Provo-Orem metro area, is growing. There's been enough general business expansion to keep longtime stores afloat even as some of their customers have gravitated to Wal-Mart.

Wal-Mart opened in September 2000, a couple of months before I bought the *Sanpete Messenger*, so I missed out on the heated debate over whether Ephraim (population 5,000), the largest town in county, should annex and rezone land for the store. But I heard about the discussion through statewide media.

The Sanpete County Office of Economic Development had conducted a study, which showed 60 percent of dollars earned in the county were being spent in Utah County, where Provo is located.

Ephraim Mayor Gary Anderson declared he wouldn't support anything that would hurt local businesses. But, he said, those businesses were already competing with a Wal-Mart 75 miles to the north in Orem. (Since then, two more Wal-Marts have opened in Utah County closer to Sanpete County.)

The main Wal-Mart opponents, besides local merchants, were preservationists who believed the huge store would change the character of Sanpete County, which is the gateway to the recently designated National



Mormon Pioneer Heritage Area.

"It's another one of those things that makes your heart sink," the owner of a pioneer replica bed-and-breakfast inn, said.

A retired turkey farmer, whose roots in Ephraim go back for generations, said, "It won't be too long before we're looking back at what we had and not what we have."

Then the store opened. As projected, Wal-Mart created about 200 jobs, about 70 percent of them full-time. Although low-paying, the jobs paid as well as other retail jobs in our economically disadvantaged county — and offered more benefits.

New business sprouted around the store. An Auto Zone, Mira Star gas station, car wash, bank branch and car lube store opened on Wal-Mart property or right across the street. A strip mall a couple of blocks down the street containing office and service business spaces is now full.

In fact, Ephraim City decided to redevelop its deteriorated rodeo grounds near Wal-Mart as a commercial subdivision. A large medical building and a national franchise video store have gone in.

Two years after Wal-Mart opened, gross taxable sales in Sanpete County were up 29 percent, compared to 11 percent statewide in the same period. The main beneficiary was Ephraim, which used some of its new sales

tax revenue to build a \$5 million city hall.

For existing business, the general pattern after Wal-Mart opened was a sharp drop in sales, followed by a gradual comeback. Two grocery stores within eight miles of Wal-Mart, a hardware store and clothing store all reported revenues dropping about 20 to 50 percent the year after Wal-Mart opened. Today, they say revenue is down 25-35 percent from pre-Wal-Mart highs.

The owner of Jensen's, a clothing store that has been on Main Street in Manti (population 3,000), a few miles south of Ephraim, for more than 75 years, says that in 2006, after years of declining sales, his revenue rose.

Because I bought my newspaper after Wal-Mart arrived, I don't have any empirical basis for judging how the store has affected the newspaper. My hunch is that Wal-Mart has helped us a little.

We do about \$3,000 per year in Wal-Mart-related business. And I don't believe we've lost an appreciable amount of business from longstanding merchants who have been hurt by Wal-Mart.

While Wal-Mart does no retail advertising, it participates in various sponsorship projects, such as our high school sports booster pages, county fair supplement and Christmas greeting issue.

When the store does community service

continued on page 7

With no Wal-Mart, tax dollars leaving county

By Bradley A. Martin

The talk has been buzzing for the last several months: Looks like Wal-Mart is finally coming to Hickman County, Tenn.

First, last fall, the scuttlebutt had the retailer buying some land in Centerville, the county seat, near the airport. The next word: No, the company is now looking 15 miles up the highway in the East Hickman Community, where a new high school will open later this year.

But nothing has happened and nobody really knows if or when it will.

“We’re still on their radar,” said Centerville Mayor Ronnie Martin, who called Wal-Mart to check, after things got quiet.

It’s not the first time that Wal-Mart has nearly flown in here; similar stories have floated in over the last two decades. But there’s a twist that makes this a little different from the usual prelude to “Big Box Retailer Swallows A Small Town.”

Within a 40-minute drive of Centerville are three Wal-Marts. And in Hickman County, where 60 percent of the workforce leaves town every morning of its employment life, that’s not as inconvenient as you might think.

Dickson is 35 minutes to the north of Centerville, just 15 minutes from East Hickman. Its Superstore is so popular that Hickman County teens head there on a Friday night just to hang out. Columbia is 35 minutes to the east. Its Superstore is

organized differently, but when Hickman Countians say they’re going shopping, this is often the destination.

Both Columbia, population 33,777, and Dickson, population 12,873, are larger than Hickman County, population 23,793, and county-seat Centerville, population 4,002, and no one begrudges the fact that they have Wal-Marts.

Then there’s Hohenwald, population 3,791, 25 minutes to the south of Centerville. On Jan. 19, a Supercenter opened in that community. Hohenwald has had a smaller Wal-Mart discount store for several years, and — like the other two — it’s no rare thing for a Hickman County resident to bump into a neighbor while strolling the aisles of this store.

Why Hickman County and Centerville don’t have a Wal-Mart is among our enduring local mysteries. In the last decade, Pamida — a Midwest retailer that builds medium-sized big-box stores in places where Wal-Mart does not physically exist — has opened in Centerville and provided a choice for those who do not travel out of Hickman County on a daily basis.

In addition, Nashville-based Dollar General and, more recently, Fred’s Discount Store and Rite-Aid, have offered local shoppers additional choices in this market. But over the last 20 years, the growing popularity of Wal-Mart — in all directions — has captured many local wallets.

Indeed, many of the traditional small-town concerns about a “big-box” outlet

moving in — destruction of existing business, shrinking advertising dollars, fewer choices — have evaporated because of the Dickson-Columbia-Hohenwald triangle that has formed around Hickman County. And some of the local choices have dried up over the years because of the retail magnets in those nearby towns.

The volume of Hickman County license plates in Wal-Mart parking lots offers testimony to the fact that many residents here believe the retailer offers better quality and more choice at a decent price, regardless of how far they have to go to get there.

They’d make more noise about getting one here if they knew just how many of their sales tax dollars — a primary funding source for schools in Tennessee — are being used to educate school kids in Dickson, Columbia and Hohenwald.

No one knows that figure.

It may well be true that the effects of triangulation have kept Hickman County free of its own, personal Wal-Mart...though it’s easy to find folks who wish for the day that the “Always Low Prices” motto hangs over a building in Hickman County.

Because of that, the buzz of a Wal-Mart rumor will be a source of restaurant chit-chat in this county until...well, maybe 20 more years.

Bradley A. Martin is editor of the Hickman County Times in Centerville, Tenn. He can be contacted at hctimes@centerville.net.

Wal-Mart a visible manifestation *from page 6*

projects or names its teacher of the year, rather than run articles for free, we encourage Wal-Mart to place ads touting its accomplishments.

Tenant businesses inside Wal-Mart, including the photo studio, optical shop and pharmacy, have also done a little advertising.

Our biggest source of income from Wal-Mart is newspaper sales. We’ve convinced store managers to permit us to attach small vending boxes to posts at most of the check stands. The result: Wal-Mart has become our largest single-copy sales location.

Sorry as I am about it, I believe Wal-Mart is simply the most visible manifestation of a larger phenomenon, one that we as small newspaper publishers and editors have to find a way to deal with.

America is becoming a nationalized, homogenized, franchised nation. It’s getting difficult for any independently owned business, be it restaurant or newspaper, to survive in any location, urban or rural.

When national and franchise businesses move into our circulation areas, as they have done and inevitably will continue to do, we

need to find a way to get our share of their advertising dollars. Otherwise, economic growth occurring nationally will pass us by, and we won’t be able to support the editorial and community-service missions of our newspapers.

Suzanne Dean is editor and publisher of the Sanpete Messenger in Manti, Utah. She can be contacted at suzanne@sanpetemessenger.com.

Wal-Mart's prices are hard to beat

By **Betta Ferrendelli**

I did something this weekend I don't normally do: I shopped at Target.

I went to the store on NM 528 because I received a Target gift card for Christmas. It's the kind that if you don't use it before a certain amount of time, the dollar amount starts to diminish. Since I always like to get the most for my money, I thought it was best to use my Target gift card while I could get the full amount. (That said, however, I do have a bad habit of letting coupons expire before I actually get around to using them, which is one reason why I never use them.)

That visit to Target was probably only my third time since I moved to New Mexico three years ago. I usually shop Wal-Mart. Not that I am an avid Wal-Mart shopper. I go more out of convenience than any sense of loyalty. Before moving to New Mexico, I'd usually go to Wal-Mart about once a month for cleaning supplies, laundry detergent and other household items, because, after all, you really can't beat the prices. Until I moved to Albuquerque, I never shopped Wal-Mart for groceries. Since Wal-Mart's grocery store is now the closest of any to my home, I shop the Cottonwood store at least once a week. There's an Albertsons nearby, but I've never shopped there.

In fact, I've shopped more at Wal-Mart in the last three years than I ever have. Many people get a sour taste in their mouths when they learn that a new store — a Supercenter to boot — is coming to their community. It's something I've never understood. Potential locations are well scouted before the first shovel full of dirt is ever turned and construction begins. Residents are certain the big-box store is going to be as obtrusive like an unwelcome guest. That never seems to materialize, either.

Rio Rancho's Wal-Mart is about to celebrate its one-year anniversary. Its opening was something this city needed. I wrote an editorial last year telling residents to get used to the fact that there would be a new Wal-Mart Supercenter in the community. Sure, that meant more traffic at the corners of Southern and Unser boulevards, but that comes with the territory when a super Wal-Mart opens in any city. Any big-box store such as Wal-Mart or a Best Buy or a Home Depot will, naturally, draw a lot of traffic. It's because there's many people in the city who will shop there. But traffic is everywhere and it's a natural by-product of any big city, Wal-Mart or not.

Traffic is a small price to pay, however, for a city the size of Rio Rancho, with its nearly 70,000 people. Wal-Mart has meant many good things for Rio Rancho, namely the city's gross receipts tax base that is, well, gross. If this city is soon to pass Santa Fe in terms of population, yet has a gross receipts tax base comparable to smaller New Mexico towns such as, let's say, Raton or Socorro, with populations stretching to meet 15,000, then we have a problem.

Let's face it. Wal-Mart does bring jobs to the community. When Wal-Mart opened last April, more than 600 people (about 70 percent of those hired were Rio Rancho residents) became Wal-Mart employees. Jobs that went to teenagers getting their first jobs, to senior citizens wanting something to do and to get out of the house. Moreover, in the year Wal-Mart has been in Rio Rancho, none of the other businesses in the area has gone out of business.

In fact, six weeks after Wal-Mart opened, businesses such as Brenda's Car Wash, showed an increase of 30 percent in business in detailing requests. Customers were asking Brenda's Car Wash owner to drop them off at Wal-Mart while their car was being detailed. Walgreen's on the corner of Southern and Unser also reported a

rise in storewide and pharmacy business.

Dollar Tree first reported a drop in business when Wal-Mart opened last April. After the newness wore off, people were back shopping at Dollar Tree. The same held true for Family Dollar, next to Dollar Tree. Also in the last year, other new businesses have opened near Wal-Mart, including a Chili's and Starbucks.

Seems one of the biggest fears when Wal-Mart opens is it will put "mom and pop" stores out of business. That hasn't happened here.

I spread my money around when I shop, as I think most people do. I shop for groceries at Wal-Mart, but I also go to Raley's, Costco and Sam's Club. I take my car to the Audi dealership for oil changes and the like. I buy my gas at Chevron. I love Starbucks. I go to sporting good stores such as Sports Authority and Big Five to buy running shoes and other sport apparel. It is probably safe to say that I am the rule, not the exception; most people probably do the same.

And let's face it, Wal-Mart's prices are hard to beat. With many families living on increasingly tight incomes, savings a few extra dollars at Wal-Mart certainly helps.

Of course, a single Wal-Mart isn't going to take care of the gross receipts tax problem in Rio Rancho, but one store is certainly a start. Wal-Mart has brought dollars to our community in the way of jobs and tax dollars. There's no way getting around that.

And it's unlikely that anyone watching the news on any given night would argue that there are worse things going on in this world today than having a Wal-Mart in the local community.

Betta Ferrendelli is managing editor of The Observer in Rio Rancho, N.M. She can be contacted at editor@rroserver.com.

Possible coming of Fred Meyer divides idyllic Homer, Alaska

By Lori Evans

More than one person has headed south on Alaska's Sterling Highway, reached the top of Homer's Baycrest Hill, gasped in awe at the view before them and rewritten their life story.

Some never go home from their vacation, others go home only to wrap up loose ends and still others start making plans for the day when they can move here permanently. There's just something about the sparkling waters of Kachemak Bay, the snow-capped, glacier-encrusted peaks of the Kenai Mountains, and that squiggly piece of land known as the Homer Spit that make people want to call this quaint community on the southern Kenai Peninsula home.

The jaw-dropping beauty is just one attraction. For a community of roughly 5,500 residents, Homer is a happening place. It has a thriving arts community, consistently making author John Villani's list of "The 100 Best Art Towns in America." There are five art galleries on Pioneer Avenue in the main business district alone, and several others scattered throughout town and beyond. The Kachemak Bay Campus of the University of Alaska Anchorage host a writers' conference every summer that brings award-winning presenters and attendees from across the United States. Pier One Theatre produces everything from Shakespeare to plays by local playwrights. Homer Theatre has put on a popular documentary film festival for the last three years and the Homer Public Library brings the community a children's international film festival.

Authors Arthur and Mary Griffith include Homer in their book, *50 Fabulous Places to Retire in America*, and last April, *Men's Journal* hailed the community as one of the 50 "healthiest, sexiest, most adventurous" towns in America, right along with Portland, Ore.; Haleiwa, Hawaii; and Santa Cruz, Calif. "Think Cape Cod 30 years ago:

progressive and sophisticated, yet working-class, with only 5,000 residents, good art galleries, two bookstores, and a roaring economy," the *Men's Journal* article reads. Some might dispute the "roaring economy," which is largely seasonal — commercial fishing and tourism — but Homer does have the good fortune to have a stable economy. The school district and the hospital, which currently is in the midst of an expansion, take the top two spots as the major employers. A host of entrepreneurs gives the community a solid retail base. And several restaurants have given the community a name as a good place to enjoy a great meal, even by big-city standards.

Given its location, it's not surprising that Homer also boasts a wealth of outdoor opportunities. Not only is there a large fleet of halibut charter boats based here, but there's also a strong base of operators who specialize in bear-viewing adventures. There's hiking and skiing trails. Great boating and fishing. Kayaking. Snowmachining. Beachcombing. Biking. Birding. The Kachemak Bay Shorebird Festival held each May is the unofficial harbinger of the summer visitor season. (This year's keynote speaker is John Acorn, star of the Discovery Channel's "Acorn the Nature Nut.") And there's great access to Kachemak Bay State Park, 400,000 acres of pristine wilderness across the bay from Homer.

While you'll find arts, culture, a good meal, even two local newspapers and plenty of outdoor adventures, what you won't find in Homer is a big-box store. At least not yet.

Late last year, after several years of plans, delays and redesigns, Fred Meyer announced construction of a Homer store had been postponed indefinitely because of higher costs for labor, freight and materials. The company spokesperson said the decision was based solely on construction costs — not the planning process or the additional costs associated with the 29 conditions

put on its permit. From initial estimates of \$16 million to \$17 million about three years ago, costs had risen \$8 million.

The debate over the store and its design was passionate, as it has been in other communities who have been down this road before Homer. Supporters see the store as an additional tax base and a source of cheap underwear (yes, at least part of the debate here centered on how there was no place locally to buy inexpensive undies). They also see savings for residents who no longer have to make the 150-mile, roundtrip drive to Soldotna to the Fred Meyer store there or the 400-plus-mile, roundtrip drive to Anchorage where shopping options abound and there is no sales tax.

Opponents fear for the future of the many small businesses that have served the Homer community for years. Despite the community's design standards, there also is the fear that a big-box store will take away from the charm that is Homer. That somewhat nebulous characteristic has been at the heart of most debates about change for at least three decades. A 1977 report titled "Homer Area Survey: Attitudes Toward Growth and Development" revealed "the attraction of living in Homer is predominantly the lifestyle found here. More than twice as many people chose that option (as) chose employment or job reasons, and as many people came for the aesthetic qualities of the area as came for the job opportunities," reported the Feb. 24, 1977, edition of the *Homer News*.

In the Fred Meyer debate, both sides made compelling arguments. Anyone who's ever stepped foot in Homer would hate for it to lose those very qualities that make it so attractive. On the other hand, the cost of living is high. Residents would benefit from additional merchandise choices, which likely could lower prices. A study by Civic Economics of Chicago indicated the southern peninsula's grocery and drug store needs already are being met locally.

So what's a newspaper to do? Surely

we shouldn't favor the revenue we might get from a big advertiser over the smaller advertisers who have done business with us (and we with them) for years. On the other hand, a Fred Meyer store, that meets the community design standards, could be a plus, couldn't it?

Can we help our community's small businesses and still welcome a Fred Meyer? Vic Hussey, a retired publisher who started in the newspaper business in classified sales in Everett, Wash., says yes. He outlines a few ways:

- In most cases, those small businesses will have to change the way they do business to stay competitive. There are plenty of success stories of small retailers who have done just that and thrive in the shadow of the big stores. Newspapers can share those stories with local retailers. Central Kenai Peninsula retailers provide some inspiring examples for Homer. Small retailers in Soldotna have already faced competition from Fred Meyer for several years; Wal-Mart and Lowe's now have plans to build in the nearby community of Kenai. Those who have continued to thrive with Fred Meyer nearby say at least part of their success had to do with offering higher qual-

ity merchandise and with focusing on what they did offer. Excellent service has helped others.

- Because newspapers generally have extensive demographic data and the knowledge on how to use it, they also can help their advertisers by working with them to develop marketing plans that take advantage of all media.

- Newspapers can sponsor seminars aimed at helping small retailers discover and sharpen their competitive positions. "Businesses need to know their strengths — maybe it's offering a specialty product, maybe it's developing great customer service, maybe it's changing hours to be available when most people shop, maybe it's a spruced up location or an upgrade of the parking lot...It's definitely developing personal relationships with your customers and then spread the word," Hussey says. Employees need to be well trained, so they can deliver the best service possible.

On the news side, we need to make sure we tell all sides of the story — the pros and the cons of a big store's plans for coming to town. If we've provided the best information we can, it's easier for readers — the community — to take the action they deem

best. This also is a place where the newspaper can shine in its watchdog role. Are planners and city council members doing their part? Is the public being involved in the process? Are there unanswered questions that we need to be asking for everyone?

On the opinion side, we need to let readers air their viewpoints. Because free enterprise is so much of what makes this a great country, it's hard to imagine a newspaper saying "no" to a big retailer coming to town. It certainly seems fair, however, that a big store be asked to meet the particular design standards of a community. After all, it's to the store's benefit to be a good neighbor.

Maybe most importantly, a newspaper should play a key role in helping a community navigate changing times — and a big-box store is a sign of the changing times. While change is often difficult, providing good information certainly helps make the process easier.

Lori Evans is editor and publisher of the Homer News in Alaska. She can be contacted at lori.evans@homernews.com.

For more information about Wal-Mart, visit these web sites:

Wal-Mart Watch

<http://walmartwatch.com/>

“Wal-Mart Watch aggressively tells a new, more truthful Wal-Mart story. We bridge the gap between ordinary citizens and community organizations concerned about Wal-Mart’s unchecked growth and negative impact on our society. We challenge Wal-Mart to embrace its moral responsibility as the nation’s biggest and most important corporation.”

Working Families for Wal-Mart

<http://www.forwalmart.com/>

“Working Families for Wal-Mart is a group of leaders from a variety of backgrounds and communities all across America. Working Families for Wal-Mart are customers, business leaders, activists, civic leaders, educators and many others with first-hand knowledge of Wal-Mart’s positive contributions to communities.

“Working Families for Wal-Mart is committed to fostering open and honest dialogue with elected officials, opinion makers and community leaders that conveys the positive contributions of Wal-Mart to working families. We believe that Wal-Mart provides value to its customers, to its associates and to the communities it serves.”

ReclaimDemocracy.org

<http://reclaimdemocracy.org/walmart/>

“ReclaimDemocracy.org is devoted to restoring citizen authority over corporations, rather than repeatedly fighting harms caused by individual corporations. So why do we compile such a

vast collection of information on one company and assist communities resisting its power? Simply because Wal-Mart is perhaps the most visible symptom of the disease — runaway corporate power — that we work to cure, and a magnet for citizens who we hope will go on to address structural problems.”

Wake-Up Wal-Mart

<http://www.wakeupwalmart.com/>

“WakeUpWalMart.com is about Americans joining together in common purpose to change Wal-Mart. There is only one force powerful enough to change the #1 Fortune 500 company in the world — the American people.

“WakeUpWalMart.com is about giving Americans the tools to empower themselves to change the world’s largest employer. We are Wal-Mart’s customers and we have the power to make Wal-Mart live up to its responsibility to its employees, our families, our communities and the nation.

“We are 345,143 Americans and growing. We are grassroots leaders, community groups and activists who have woken up to the high costs of Wal-Mart and recognize Wal-Mart’s negative impact on our jobs, our wages, our health care and our communities.”

Sprawl-Busters

<http://www.sprawl-busters.com/>

“Sprawl-Busters Consultants help local community coalitions on-site to design and implement successful campaigns against megastores and other undesirable large-scale developments.”

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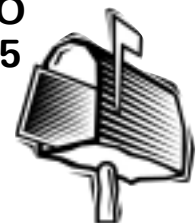
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