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Big Box site goes to hearing

A neighborhood-developer battle on Northeast 82nd Avenue, in a suspended state for several months, is now moving toward a major confrontation.

Smart Centres of Canada wants to develop a 10-acre former landfill on Northeast 82nd Avenue at Siskiyou Street, across from Madison High School. The land is zoned for industrial use, and commercial activity is limited to a total of 60,000 square feet. Smart Centres is seeking a conditional use permit for a total of 240,000 square feet, including 190,000 in a single structure. The company also wants a surface lot with 900 parking spaces. After filing its application, it asked the city to put the matter on hold for several months. In late July, that hold was lifted.

City Hearings Officer Gregory Frank will hold a public hearing on the issue beginning at 9 a.m. on Monday, Oct. 1 at 1900 S.W. Fourth Ave. Although most such hearings take two to three hours, Frank has reserved the entire day, and Oct. 3 if necessary, to take public testimony — with good reason.

The Madison South and Roseway neighborhood associations have launched a major campaign to defeat the proposal. They have accumulated a list of 1,400 supporters within the two neighborhoods, and the lawns are dotted with hundreds of "Save Madison South" and "Save Roseway" lawn signs. Twice they have picketed on 82nd Avenue, the last time in conjunction with a National Night Out picnic at Glenhaven Park on Aug. 7. Through a variety of fundraising activities, they have acquired a war chest of several thousand dollars and have used it to retain attorney Ken Helm and the traffic-consulting firm Greenlight Engineering. Finally, they are urging their supporters to write letters to planner Sylvia Cate, who is charged with making a recommendation on the case, and to testify at the hearing.

Why all the fuss?

Madison South leaders are convinced that a Wal-Mart outlet will occupy the proposed building. Smart Centres spokespeople insist that no tenant has been signed for the space, but Madison South leaders say that Wal-Mart has been the anchor tenant in two thirds of the company's developments. Regardless, they say, any big box outlet at that site would generate traffic that would overload an already crowded, dangerous street directly across from a school, and draw business away from local merchants.

Smart Centres, in its turn, has hired land use attorney Steve Pfeiffer and traffic consultant Kittelson and Associates. It has also reportedly done outreach to some business associations and church groups in search of local support.

The case is a Type III land use review, providing the highest level of public review. Frank's decision can be appealed to the Portland City Council — the neighborhood associations can do so without paying a fee — and most observers feel that one side or the other will appeal no matter what the decision is.