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The little guys share tactics for fending off the big box

Wal-Mart - Area opponents offer ideas for hiring experts and aggressive fundraising

Tuesday, June 26, 2007

CATHERINE TREVISON
The Oregonian Staff

Dawn Tryon thinks she might be fighting Wal-Mart.

She can't be sure -- there's no store name attached to an application to build a giant retail space on Northeast 82nd Avenue, on a former gravel pit and landfill near Madison High School in Portland.

But her group, Save Madison South Committee, has already talked strategy with Wal-Mart opponents in other parts of the Portland area. She's looking for ways that a group of neighbors could tackle the plans of the world's largest retailer -- one that has more than 4,000 U.S. stores and \$345 billion in net sales last year.

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She didn't have to look far for advice -- in fact, only a few miles east to GreshamFirst, a group that last week helped win a fight against a Wal-Mart supercenter. Its suggestions? Go door to door to spread the word. Raise serious money -- it could take as much as \$50,000 to get through hearings and appeals. And hire legal, traffic and land-use experts to comb through crucial issues.

"The biggest thing is you just can't relax," Tryon said she was told. "Anytime you let your guard down, they're going to poke right in there."

Wal-Mart had just a handful of Oregon stores before it opened a food distribution center in south-central Washington in 2004. The distribution center sends its trucks to warehouse clubs and supercenters, which combine traditional Wal-Mart discount departments with a full-size grocery.

In some places, supercenters were welcomed for providing low prices and hundreds of jobs. Others sparked vigorous opposition from neighbors who objected to everything from traffic to Wal-Mart's business practices. Communities such as Hood River and Hillsboro organized protests, challenges and appeals.

Wal-Mart gained an aggressive reputation in Oregon, appealing unfavorable city rulings to the state Land Use Board of Appeals and the Oregon Court of Appeals. Some groups said they couldn't match that strength.

"We were totally amateurs; I didn't know what I didn't know," said Tracy Irwin, whose group, Cornelius First, gave up its fight last fall. The Cornelius supercenter is scheduled to open in 2008.

But other community groups fought and won. Hood River Citizens for Responsible Growth claimed victory after its case went to the state land-use board in 2004. Save Cedar Mill opposed a Beaverton supercenter; when the city ruled against the company in 2006, Wal-Mart decided not to appeal. It was the first time in Oregon that the company did not appeal a denial, Wal-Mart's lawyer said at the time.

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Still, when Wal-Mart announced last Wednesday that it would not pursue its plans in Gresham at Powell Boulevard and 182nd Avenue, opponents reacted with disbelief.

"I'm honestly stunned," said Mike Price, GreshamFirst's spokesman. "It doesn't mean they aren't going to try again. . . . Until they bring a proposal that works or until the property's sold, I'm left to wonder whether or not it's over."

One key to GreshamFirst's victory, Price said, was getting organized early. At the first neighborhood meeting in 2005, while some angry residents chanted and yelled, Price thanked Wal-Mart for bringing the neighborhood together and handed out an e-mail address to connect the plan's opponents.

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At the first meetings, they started dividing work, planning fundraisers and looking for traffic engineers, lawyers and other professionals to give them direction. Neighbors need logic and direction, not emotion, Price said.

The group's Seattle-based lawyer, David Bricklin, agreed. He specializes in land-use issues; his firm, Bricklin Newman Dold, has been involved in about a dozen Wal-Mart struggles in the Northwest, he said.

"So much of our land-use laws are based on technical evaluations of traffic issues or noise or stormwater runoff, things like that," Bricklin said. "Citizen groups are not well-equipped generally to fight those fights on their own."

But hiring experts often means serious cash, even when those experts discount fees, Bricklin said.

GreshamFirst tried every approach, from selling yard signs to selling donated equipment on eBay.

"If citizens are thinking about doing this, they need to be thinking of tens of thousands of dollars," Bricklin said.

Some groups have gotten financial help from the grocery workers union. United Food and Commercial Workers Local 555 keeps a page on its Web site promoting fights against Wal-Marts in several Oregon communities.

Ultimately, Bricklin said, groups may benefit from Wal-Mart's new expansion approach. The company announced June 1 that it would cut domestic store expansion plans by 25 percent this year and by a third next year; instead, it will focus on boosting sales at existing stores.

Jennifer Holder, Wal-Mart's Oregon spokeswoman, was unable to say whether the new expansion strategy affected the Gresham decision, but the company does remain interested in the greater Portland market, she said.

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