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Odors force Wal-Mart on landfill to close

Garfield Heights store evacuated after methane leak; company seeking source

Thursday, December 07, 2006

Henry J. Gomez
Plain Dealer Reporter

Garfield Heights -- In the midst of the crucial holiday shopping season, a Wal-Mart has closed its doors at City View Center.

Not because of bad sales, but because of bad smells.

On Tuesday evening, store officials evacuated customers after detecting the presence of methane gas. The store remained closed Wednesday as crews worked to identify the problem.

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It is unknown when the store will reopen, but the Wal-Mart incident is the latest in a string of environmental concerns to beset City View, which sits atop an old landfill.

Developer John McGill, whose Solon-based firm owns the property, said faulty floor drains had been emitting sewer gas, which typically includes mixtures of methane and rotten egg-scented hydrogen sulfide. He said the problem would be corrected.

"It's a minimal issue," McGill said. Wal-Mart "acted on the side of safety."

Officials from Wal-Mart and the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, which is closely monitoring City View, said the exact source of the methane had not

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been identified.

Employees had been complaining of an odor, and Wal-Mart had called in consultants to measure methane levels, said Mike Settles, an EPA spokesman.

Mia Masten, director of corporate affairs for Wal-Mart's Midwest division, said she did not know when the store would reopen. She added that the methane levels were not considered to be dangerous but were of enough concern to encourage management to close the store.

The company has taken measures to ensure employees do not lose income, Masten said. "Trust me, it's the holiday season, and we want to reopen as soon as possible."

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For McGill, the closing is another environmentally related hang-up surrounding the big-box retail center, which is on Transportation Boulevard near Interstate 480. The closing also comes as McGill tries to sell the property, which is listed at \$100.5 million.

The developer conceded that the environmental issues could concern potential buyers. After all, McGill has cited the constant scrutiny from the Ohio EPA, which had to approve the project because of its location, as a reason he decided to put City View on the market in September.

"But if anything, this shows the project has a responsible owner and a responsible tenant," McGill said. "We addressed the issue. If anything, that should be a comforting factor."

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Settles, the state EPA's spokesman, said an enforcement action is pending against McGill. Regulators do not feel the developer has remedied earlier problems with water that seeps from the side of the hill on which City View sits. There also have been concerns about methane levels, but Settles said there have been no issues reported regarding the Wal-Mart.

Bill Skowronski, the EPA's district chief for Northeast Ohio, said that while methane is not considered a toxic gas, it can cause an explosion. Garfield

Odors force Wal-Mart on landfill to close

Heights Mayor Thomas Longo said he has heard city residents express concern over such a possibility but stands by reports from his safety forces and inspectors that the methane levels at City View are not dangerous.

Because City View was built on a landfill, stores there are equipped with alarms that sound to signal unsafe methane levels. The alarms did not sound Tuesday. A fire inspector called to the store found no presence of methane gas, Garfield Heights Fire Chief Anthony Collova said.

McGill said the sewer gas could be leaking because of an installation problem. He added that the engineer who worked on the Wal-Mart drains did not work on other City View stores.

"Knock on wood, it's been absolutely no issue" for other tenants, McGill said.

Meanwhile, hundreds of shoppers were turned away Wednesday, when the only Wal-Mart greeter was a man sitting on the hood of his car who announced to passers-by that the store was closed indefinitely. A printed sign on the glass doors apologized for the inconvenience.

Rebecca Coffee, a senior at Bedford High School, had wanted to get a video and cat food there. She said she planned to drive to the Wal-Mart in Macedonia instead.

"It has smelled bad here in the past on hot days or when it was flooding from heavy rains," she said. "But it didn't seem to stop anybody from shopping here."


Plain Dealer reporters Damian G. Guevara and Michael Scott contributed to this story.

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