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Wal-Mart disputes Adams' alert

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Wal-Mart might be trucking onto Northeast 82nd Avenue.

At least, that's the message you get from city Commissioner Sam Adams.

Adams, always the anti-Wal-Mart leader inside City Hall, has kept a close eye on the chain's attempts to probe Portland for its second store.

His staff last week discovered that a developer had filed plans for a big-box store near Madison High School. Based on the size of the store, Adams thought it might be a Wal-Mart. His staff broke the news on his blog: "Wal-Mart's on the March in Roseway?"

Turns out, the answer — for now — is no.

Yes, Canadian developer SmartCentres has started plans to build a 185,000-square-foot store at the site. And yes, SmartCentres has built plenty of Wal-Marts north of the U.S. border.

But spokesman Flavio Volpe says it hasn't chatted with retail chains about the spot. The developer wants to get going on city permits before marketing it to retailers.

"It's nothing yet," Volpe says.

The word from Wal-Mart is the same. Spokeswoman Jennifer Holder says, "It is not our site. It has not been approved. It's pure speculative real estate right now."

More than any of his council peers, Adams has taken an unusually active role to block the world's largest retail chain from expanding in Portland. Wal-Mart, he says, hurts small businesses, snarls traffic and takes advantage of its workers with paltry wages and poor health care benefits.

On this issue, Adams is more activist than commissioner. He's got an anti-Wal-Mart sign in his City Hall window facing Southwest Fifth Avenue and regularly attends rallies opposing Wal-Mart. Given his public stance, and based on advice from the city attorney, Adams says he won't vote on Wal-Mart's land-use issues because of conflict-of-interest concerns.

"In a local economy that is so dependent on small businesses, I think it's part of my duty to ensure that a bad-acting company doesn't end up here," Adams said earlier this year.

In a posting to Adams' Web site, staffer Jesse Beason added this from a New York Times story: Wal-Mart "earned \$11 billion in profit last year, but fewer than half of its employees in the United States are covered by its health care plan, and the average worker earns less than \$20,000 a year."

But some people who checked Adams' site saw things differently.

"City policies are not working to lower unemployment," one person wrote. "Maybe the store can even establish work-study programs with low-income students at the struggling Madison High School. . . . The positives definitely outweigh the negative anti-Wal-Mart rhetoric."

And Wal-Mart's Holder says Adams should have better things to do than track her company's every move. "I think Sam Adams is wasting taxpayer resources," she said.

Beason said he linked the permit filing to Wal-Mart because "it's become clear they're looking for a place in Portland that's close in. The numbers speak for themselves."

Wal-Mart has 29 stores in Oregon but only one in the state's biggest city, just down 82nd Avenue at Eastport Plaza. The chain might not be ready to move into the site at 2800 N.E. 82nd Ave., but that doesn't mean it won't be later.

Wal-Mart is a likely candidate. SmartCentres, a major shopping-center builder in Canada, has picked Portland as its first U.S. project. Of the company's 170 shopping centers, 118 have a Wal-Mart, Volpe says.

And few stores other than Wal-Mart need that much space. Volpe says other possibilities would be Target, Home Depot or Lowe's.

Whatever it is, a big box of that size could be tough to get through the city and, if necessary, the City Council.

Adams says the store would dump more traffic on the already troubled intersection at 82nd Avenue and Fremont Street and would raise questions about snarls at the Interstate 84 interchange nearby.

Adams moved quickly to discourage a Wal-Mart on Hayden Island because of concerns about traffic. Soon after the chain acknowledged Hayden Island as a potential site, Adams persuaded the council to consider a moratorium on commercial construction there.

Whatever happens on 82nd Avenue, Portland continues to be a hot spot for Wal-Mart's expansion. And Wal-Mart will continue to be a hot topic for Adams.

Holder, Wal-Mart's spokeswoman, said: "It's almost as if Sam is going to find property for us."

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