

## **It's about Size and Location—Not being Pro or Anti Wal-Mart**

### **SAGA IS NOT ANTI WAL-MART!**

In letters to the editor, on local radio and on some websites, many have charged SAGA with being anti Wal-Mart. Some people believe that if you say something often enough that will make it true. These claims can be made but that will not make them true. SAGA is NOT anti-Wal-Mart. SAGA is eager to have a department store and grocery store come to Saranac Lake as long as they meet the criteria we have outlined previously:

- Stores are 40,000 square feet or less and the total shopping center is no more than 68,000 square feet
- Appearances are attractive and appropriate for the community
- The location is appropriate
- Any “big-box” store covers the costs for upgrading all of the community infrastructure required for the project

Additionally we believe that if Wal-Mart would locate in the downtown, the community should demand that:

- Wal-Mart build a multi-story covered parking facility available to the entire community
- The Village should ensure that any Wal-Mart buildings be made available to other businesses should Wal-Mart leave town

### **SIZE**

Appropriate size is 40,000 square feet for a single store or 68,000 square feet for a shopping center. We don't think that is unreasonable. This type of size limitation has worked well for North Elba and more than 25 communities around the country, two countries (Ireland and Norway) have even limited stores to 32,000 sq. ft. in size. March 21<sup>st</sup>, the same day we elected a new Mayor and two new Village Trustees, Damariscotta, Maine passed a referendum limiting retail stores to no more than 35,000 square feet. It has been pointed out that the proposed 121,000 square foot store includes a pharmacy and a supermarket. Does Saranac Lake really need another pharmacy? We have three very healthy pharmacies, creating a healthy and competitive business environment; we don't need a fourth. Let's save that square footage for a store that the community really needs. If Wal-Mart wants to build a grocery store, fine, build a 34,000 square foot department store and a 34,000 square foot grocery store.

### **LOCATION**

The ideal location for this kind of development is downtown Saranac Lake. It would be within walking distance for the majority of village residents, and it would support and promote the vitality of the downtown. The proposed location will not provide that kind of access. Another reason to locate a large store downtown would be to keep development in Harrietstown and Franklin County. This would allow sales tax and property tax revenue to go to the town and county providing services to the development's employees. Things like Medicare, subsidized housing and subsidized transportation will be necessary for employees of a big-box store. If the currently proposed site is utilized, Franklin County will get stuck providing support services without the corresponding revenue.

Some would argue that a downtown site can't work, that there are too many obstacles to overcome. That is short-sighted thinking. Obstacles are only problems to solve. If the community believes that a downtown site is the best location, we can make it happen. If there is a will, there is a way. We whole heartedly agree with Frank Casier's commentary of April 10<sup>th</sup>. Imagine a two-story downtown store with a 30,000 square foot imprint and a two-story covered garage.

### **IT IS NOT A DONE DEAL**

If we had a quarter for every person who questioned why we are still involved with this process, we could supply socks and underwear to every Saranac Lake citizen for a year. In each case, we are told that it is a done deal and asked why SAGA is still working so hard. It is NOT a done deal at all. If Wal-Mart submitted an application tomorrow, it would take a minimum of two years or more before any doors would open. State and local governments have a process in place that allows for public input and opportunities to challenge the proposal along the way. All we have to do is look at Lake Placid to realize that the public has the power to influence the outcome. Keep in mind that Lake Placid won two court cases that kept Wal-Mart out entirely. Saranac Lake has the ability to determine its own future.

Regarding Essex County Manager Cliff Donaldson, we have two concerns. No matter how well intentioned, it is apparent from reading the Essex County Resolution No. 312 that he overstepped his charge. His charge was clearly limited to finding a replacement store for the former Ames site. Since stores have indeed been found for that site, then his job was done long ago. From what we have been able to determine, Mr. Donaldson was never authorized to solicit new stores for new sites. Given the secrecy of Mr. Donaldson's efforts and the eventual disclosure that Wal-Mart did indeed look at downtown sites, we have serious concerns that Wal-Mart may well have been discouraged from looking at a downtown site in order to insure an Essex County location.

### **TAX REVENUES**

One of the arguments that makes big box development desirable is the increased tax revenue that would be realized. Figures are being thrown about and stated as fact. We encourage people to examine these figures closely. What we do know is:

- At the proposed North Elba site, the Village of Saranac Lake will receive NO sales tax revenue
- In 1997 when Wal-Mart built a store in Ticonderoga, the company said it would not seek a payment in lieu of taxes (PILOT), but it later applied for and received a 10-year PILOT agreement. This is an issue of trust.

There are very few cases where SAGA would even consider a PILOT for Wal-Mart. **One case MIGHT be IF they built a two-story downtown store with a covered multi-story parking garage that was available to the community and IF action was taken to ensure that the building would be made available to another business should Wal-Mart ever leave town.**

**BOTTOM LINE**

The recent election has clearly demonstrated that the voters in the Village of Saranac Lake want a department store that is of reasonable size and in the best location. SAGA looks forward to working with civic organizations, as well as state and local governments, to bring the type of retail development that everyone in Saranac Lake can be proud of.