

# Proposed Wal-Mart A Matter Of Character For Residents



The proposed site for the Wal-Mart is bounded by Temple Terrace Highway on the right and Harney Rd. on the left. Davis Rd. bounds the property at the bottom of the photo.

JIM REED/The Tampa Tribune

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TEMPLE TERRACE - It's nearing dusk as Pat Weick stands a few feet from busy Davis Road. A breeze from passing traffic tousles her hair and she waits to signal the visitor in her driveway that it's OK to pull out.

It's the same scenario every time Weick has someone visit her home of 15 years. Despite the rural feeling of the neighborhood and a picturesque view of horses grazing in a field adjacent to her property, Weick said she knows how dangerous Davis Road can be for drivers and pedestrians.

"Not all that long ago, I was driving along right on this street, it was 8 a.m. and suddenly my husband said, 'Call 911,' " Weick said. "A truck was flipping over right in front of us. That sign may say, '40 mph' but no one pays any attention to it."

Lately, though, Weick and others are paying plenty of attention to what's happening in their community. They are hoping Hillsborough County officials will follow suit Monday when a zoning hearing master considers Wal-Mart's application to build a Supercenter a mile from Weick's house. The worry among many Davis Road residents is that the store will prompt more drivers to cut through their neighborhood from Fowler Avenue and Morris Bridge Road and eventually force Davis Road to be widened. Many houses are built within 15 feet of the road, and widening could lead to chunks of property being taken for right of way.

"See this canopy of beautiful oak trees? That could be gone," Weick said. "I like things the way they are. I moved here because I like seeing horses, I like seeing wildlife. I don't want that changing."

Educating residents in the diverse neighborhoods surrounding the proposed store site has been challenging. Among those who are trying to spread the word is Yolonda Clifton, who spent several nights going door-to-door gathering signatures for a petition opposing the store. She was surprised after visiting a dozen houses Wednesday night and finding that residents in five of the homes had not heard about Wal-Mart's plans.

"I have nothing against Wal-Mart," said Clifton, who lives off 78th Street and Temple Terrace Highway. "I just don't think it belongs in a residential area. To me, it's all about safety and traffic. This has been a safe neighborhood for 20 years; I want to keep it that way."

The site for the proposed 206,000-square-foot Wal-Mart Supercenter and four out parcels is a heavily wooded area sandwiched between Temple Terrace Highway and two-lane Harney Road. The property is bordered by two-lane Davis Road to the east and a residential area stretching west to 78th Street, also two lanes. At 78th Street and Temple Terrace Highway, a sign promises town houses starting at \$249,000.

Although there is plenty of traffic on four-lane Temple Terrace Highway, it has remained a relatively quiet area dominated by smaller businesses, light industry, churches and homes.

At night, the highway and side streets are poorly lit. The only glare on the highway comes from the fluorescent lights of 7 Days Food Mart and a partially deserted shopping plaza that is home to a Kash n' Karry and a Family Dollar, a handful of mom-and-pop-style eateries and other businesses.

### **Growing Concerns Over Crime**

For Clifton and other residents, including neighbor Tom Lehman, the building of the Wal-Mart equates with an increased burden on Temple Terrace police and a possible reduction in response times. Although the store would be outside city limits, the department's mutual-aid agreement with the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office likely would have officers handling some calls. If the city were to annex the property, which has been a consideration, the police would assume responsibility for all law enforcement there.

The concern is that what happened in Port Richey could happen in Temple Terrace. According to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, crime in Port Richey shot up almost 60 percent in 2002. In the wake of the increase, then Port Richey Police Chief William Downs told The Tampa Tribune that the increase was due to a Wal-Mart Supercenter's opening at Ridge Road and U.S. 19 in 2001. The city's larceny cases, including petty theft and shoplifting, skyrocketed from 291 to 527 in a year and sent police officers scrambling to keep pace.

### **Mixed Feelings Divide Community**

Although traffic tops the list of reasons people opposing the Wal-Mart have given at public meetings in Temple Terrace, concerns also exist about whether smaller business can survive with a big-box store nearby.

Feelings were mixed among area business operators.

There are plenty of worries for Gus Torres, who manages a family-owned business, East Lake Food Mart, at 8706 Harney Road. If built, the Wal-Mart would be across from the family's small grocery store with a full-service meat counter and deli that offers Cuban and Caribbean foods. The store caters to the Hispanic community and has thrived since opening two years ago, Torres said.

"It worries me, but you never know what it will bring," he said. "It might bring more customers or it might take them away."

Standing in line to get takeout Wednesday night, resident Patsy Swint said she welcomes the Wal-Mart, but it won't keep her from the deli that she frequents several times a month.

"If I want to go to Wal-Mart now, I go to New Tampa," she said. "But there are certain times of the day you can't go. Like right now, it's 5 p.m. and if I tried, I would be sitting still in traffic on [Interstate] 75."

For convenience sake, Tim Lin, manager at China One in the nearby Kash n' Karry shopping plaza, said he also wants a Wal-Mart closer than where he now shops on Fletcher Avenue.

"I work 10:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m., so when I get off, there's no place to shop," he said. "It would be so easy for us if we had it."

Just as the public is split on the issue, so too was the Temple Terrace City Council. Despite being asked by the county to weigh in on the proposed store, the council was unable to reach a decision about whether to support the project. Instead, it opted to forward a city staff analysis outlining traffic and economic concerns. The analysis determined the store would bring 17,000 vehicles a day to the area, which is an increase of 13,000 cars on city streets.

However, the council also opted to leave out a city staff recommendation against building the store and not to include the comments of about 100 residents who spoke for and against the store at two public meetings.

The move disappointed the residents who spoke because, in order to be heard, they now will have to attend Monday's hearing in Tampa. Anyone who does not speak Monday will not be allowed to offer their opinion when the matter is taken up by Hillsborough County commissioners in December, according to a county rule.

### **The County Has Final Say**

When considering Wal-Mart's bid, a zoning hearing master also will consider a report from the Hillsborough County Planning Commission that was completed Monday. In the report, the commission found that the store is inconsistent with the county's comprehensive plan. The reasons cited include that the location is not at a major intersection and the nearest intersection to the proposed 35-acre site is removed by a parcel of land that is zoned for a residential development. The planning commission found a more appropriate location for the store to be land to the east that abuts Davis Road and is across from the Kash n' Karry plaza.

"The overall impact of a retailer of this intense square footage would significantly change the character of the surrounding area," the planning commission wrote in its report.

Although Weick and others agree with that assessment, they question whether maintaining the character of their community will be enough to stop Wal-Mart from moving in.

"People need to realize this isn't something that's going to go away," Weick said. "We need to keep fighting it now or pay for it later."

## **IF YOU GO**

**WHAT:** Rezoning hearing for proposed Wal-Mart Supercenter

**WHEN:** 6 p.m. Monday

**WHERE:** Hillsborough County commissioners' boardroom, second floor, Fred B. Karl County Center, 601 E. Kennedy Blvd.

"I like seeing wildlife. I don't want that changing."

**PAT WEICK** Who lives on busy and dangerous Davis Road

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