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Welcome to Wal-Mart? Even Some of Its Fans Don't Want One in the City

By ELIZABETH A. HARRIS

SECAUCUS, N.J. — Shawneequa Clark, who lives in Brooklyn, goes to Wal-Mart several times a month. She appreciates the variety, she enjoys the grocery selection, and she takes advantage of the savings.

In short, she loves Wal-Mart. As long as it stays in New Jersey.

Wal-Mart has begun another aggressive lobbying campaign to build a store in New York City.

Company officials argue that New Yorkers already shop at Wal-Mart and that expanding into the city would make it more convenient for them.

But interviews with New Yorkers shopping here on a recent day revealed some surprising views: even some of Wal-Mart's loyal customers would rather drive to the bargains than risk bringing those low prices — along with the crowds and competition that may come with them — closer to home.

“I don't believe Wal-Mart should be in the city,” Ms. Clark, 29, said. “All the local mom-and-pop stores would lose business. And it's already congested. I mean, can you just imagine?”

Last year, New York City residents spent \$165 million at Wal-Mart stores, including those in Secaucus,

Saddle Brook, N.J., and Valley Stream, N.Y. (The company tracks spending through credit card addresses.)

The chain is looking at locations in all five boroughs, and a contentious debate has begun about the company's labor policies and potential effect on neighborhood retail areas.

Outside the 189,000-square-foot Wal-Mart in Secaucus, Vinny Nicosia, 52, who lives in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, said he could not support a store in the city.

"I'm not opposed to it in out-of-the-way places, but in the middle of the city, it's tough," Mr. Nicosia said. "It kills the neighborhood shops. I grew up in the neighborhood shops, and I don't want them to go away."

Steven Restivo, a spokesman for Wal-Mart, rejected the idea that the chain hurts small businesses.

"In the majority of cases our stores serve as a magnet for growth and development," Mr. Restivo said. "We have more than 140 million customers that shop our stores each week, and what we find is that businesses that can take advantage of the increase in customer traffic succeed."

He also said Wal-Mart would make adjustments for New York City, including opening smaller stores. Although its stores can be well over 150,000 square feet, some of those planned for the city would be under 30,000.

The Partnership for New York City, a business group, is backing Wal-Mart.

Kathryn S. Wylde, the partnership's president, said the stores could attract development and commerce, much as anchor stores in malls do.

"You get a big destination store to draw the traffic, then fill in with small stores, and everybody benefits," she said. "It's just a function of them figuring out the right location."

Of course, there are New Yorkers who would be happy to have a Wal-Mart in their city. Of the dozen

residents interviewed while shopping in Secaucus on a recent afternoon, half said they would oppose the retailer, while half said they would welcome it.

Frank Clark, an 80-year-old retiree who makes trips to New Jersey several times a month to go to Wal-Mart with his wife, Frances, 75, said he would love to have a store closer to his home, in Fort Hamilton, Brooklyn.

“Absolutely!” he said. “If you’re on a fixed income, it’s great.”

“I’ll tell you how good the savings are,” he added. “I drive over the Verrazano Bridge, I go over the Bayonne Bridge and I come here, and those two bridges cost me \$17, plus the price of gas. And I still make out better buying here than if I did in my own neighborhood.”

Other New Yorkers shopping at Wal-Mart said they did not understand what the fuss was about, in light of the other big retailers that now dot the city.

“There’s a Kmart where I live, there’s a Kmart near my job,” said Joe Gregory, 44, a postal worker from the Bronx, who came to Wal-Mart to buy a remote-controlled puppy for his 8-year-old daughter. Mr. Gregory said that he did not see much difference between the two chains, and that he would be perfectly happy to have a Wal-Mart nearby.

Nonetheless, the fight from unions, city officials and community groups is likely to be fierce. City Council hearings are expected to begin next month.

“There is a finite amount of shopping dollars out there, and if Wal-Mart is absorbing a huge percentage of them, they aren’t left for the other retailers,” said Richard Lipsky, a lobbyist for local businesses who is fighting Wal-Mart. “If you want a bargain, you get in your car and you go to the bargain. You don’t ever want to bring the bargain into the neighborhood.”



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