

"Federation Corner" column
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Site of planned gas station is too close for comfort

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Take our gas station...please!

For those of you too young to recognize it, the opening sentence of this piece is a shameless takeoff on an old Henny Youngman comedy routine. But this story is not funny. Every one loves a good David and Goliath story, right? Well, maybe not Goliath. This story is about many Davids and two Goliaths. In the interest of full disclosure, I am one of the Davids, but only the most recent to pick up a slingshot.

The two Goliaths are Costco and the Westfield Corporation, an international shopping center management company headquartered in Australia. The Davids are numerous activists of the Kensington Heights Civic Association, or KHCA (online at kensingtonheightsmd.org), joined last year by members of the Stop Costco Gas Coalition (online at www.stopcostcogas.org).

Long story short (you can get the details at either website), in early 2010 Costco and Westfield reps informed the citizens of Kensington Heights that Costco/Westfield, together with County Executive Isiah Leggett, had worked out a plan to build a Costco Warehouse store and a Costco mega gas station in Westfield's Wheaton Plaza, right next to the KHCA neighborhood. What a great deal! Everyone loves Costco. And cheap gas--what's not to like?

What's not to like? Try a sixteen pump station dispensing some twelve million gallons of gas per year, and the noxious, health-risk fumes associated with that activity...and anywhere from twenty to sixty cars idling simultaneously at various times during a typical day, spewing more fumes as they wait to get their "fix" of gasoline...and the noise of fueling trucks and cars, and the additional traffic...and, oh yes, some negative environmental impact--all of this within a few hundred feet of the closest KHCA homes and a neighborhood swim club, and around 1000 feet from a public school (Stephen Knolls) for "medically fragile" special needs kids, many already suffering from a variety of respiratory problems.

Surprise! The citizens, many of whom shop at Costco wherever possible, and some of whom buy Costco gas when possible, were pretty happy about the store (well, maybe not everybody), but were NOT happy about a huge gas station being built nearly in their back yards. So they went to work. Then, on July 24, 2012, the Montgomery County Council passed Zoning Text Amendment 12-07, pushed by the civic activists and others. This ZTA established the requirement of a buffer zone of 300 feet (not nearly enough, but maybe better than nothing) between any such gas station and "sensitive land uses" like parks and schools. Homes were not included in the legislation...I guess it was felt people who live in them don't inhale.

So the standards for siting a mega gas station had been changed, and Costco had to file a new application for a Special Exception to build their mega gas station at Wheaton Plaza. They figured out how to move the proposed site a teeny bit to the east, satisfying the new requirements imposed by ZTA 12-07 but placing the planned gas station even closer to some homes and to the school.

By October of 2012 everyone was getting very tired and just a little cranky. A group of civic activists (yours truly included) decided to form an umbrella group to expand the fight, and the Stop Costco Gas Coalition was created. This is not a NIMBY issue (the acronym for Not in My Back Yard). It is a NOBY issue...No One's Back Yard. Costco envisions similar siting of gas stations as part of their new "corporate model."

(These mega gas stations are supposedly the wave of the future.) Ain't corporate models great? Everyone remember "the New Coke"?

While at least one wag has opined that he would love to have the Costco gas station in his back yard if we don't want it--no name provided here, to protect the innocent-- the Stop Costco Gas Coalition intends to push for statewide legislation to establish meaningful buffer zone guidelines for all such facilities. Our unofficial motto is "saving everyone's back yard." And in true civic activist tradition we are fighting over whether it should be "saving" or "protecting," and struggling with where to put the apostrophe.

While everyone now waits for the Board of Appeals to consider the new Special Exception application filed by Costco, everyone is lobbying everyone they can think of and generally working like crazy. After all, with the elections now over for more than two months, what else have we got to do?

So there you have it, in a nutshell. And you know about two websites on which you can access more information on this issue than any sane person would want to read. But maybe you SHOULD at least consider the issue. Or consider the opening sentence of this column. Would YOU like the mega gas station in your neighborhood? Do you trust Costco and various government entities to decide?

I ran this article past several other Davids and they did not approve, commenting that jocularity is not appropriate to such a serious issue. But I heard some snickers. And I'm pretty sure my old friend and fellow activist, the late Wayne Goldstein, would have liked it. So let me suggest a different title: "Take your gas station and..."

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to montgomerycivic@yahoo.com