

Do We “Need” A Costco Mega Station?

To be able to obtain a Special Exception permit, an applicant must show there is a “need” to build a new station. Does Wheaton “need” any more stations? Well, let’s see: the Wheaton area has approximately 30 gas stations already available to it within a 7-minute driving radius (encompassing roughly Forest Glen to Glenmont and Kensington to Four Corners). Those stations are pumping at far less than 50% of their maximum capacity. Our informal review of County geography suggests that no other area has a greater concentration of stations within a similar driving radius. This station, moreover, will pump 12 million gallons a year, which is the equivalent of adding *eight* new regular stations, which only pump about 1.5 million gallons on average.

The vast majority of the local *neighborhood* will not benefit from the Costco station at all – only about 25% of local households are expected to be Costco members. Everyone else will only suffer the downsides of the station – the added traffic, noise, emissions, and the like. Moreover, the Costco station sells *only* gas and *only* for relatively short hours. If it drives other stations out of business, *everyone* – Costco members and non-members alike – will lose access to stations that operate late at night, or offer food and beverages, or operate service bays, or even have restrooms!

Costco has made clear that the station is intended to serve *its* regional member base, *not* the local neighborhood. Costco’s business model is to build a very small number of very busy stores that serve as a magnet to draw customers from many miles away. (It currently has only nine stores in the entire state of Maryland. Walmart, by contrast has 12 in the Baltimore-Washington corridor alone.) As result, its stations operate at a far higher percentage of their capacity than any normal station – we calculate as much as 85-90% of the possible maximum volume. The absolutely predictable result is that cars quickly overwhelm the pumping capacity at busy times and sit idling in long lines (sometimes VERY long), often for extended periods of time (e.g. 10-30 minutes).

Do we “need” this? Doesn’t seem likely – particularly when we are located in a “smart growth” area directly adjacent to a major Metro stop and bus destination. Oh, and let’s not forget – the federal Energy Information Agency projects that all of that smart growth and better fuel technology means that gas usage will *shrink* for quite a while and will barely exceed current usage by 2035! “Need” another station? Hardly!

1. 4.5 minutes per car/60 minutes per hour = 13.5 cars per hour x 12 gallons per car = 162 gallons per hour x 16 pumps = 2592 gallons per hour x 5200 hours per year (approx. 100 hours per week times 52 weeks per year) = 13,478,400 gallons maximum capacity. 12 million gallons equal 89 percent of that total.