

Stop Costco Gas Coalition (SCGC) Talking Points

What is the SCGC and what are its goals?

We are a newly formed (since October 2012) 'big tent' organization with two major goals:

1. prevent Costco from building a mega gas station in Westfield Wheaton Plaza at a site that is much too close to homes, a public school, and an outdoor recreational facility.
2. advocate for county-, state- and nation-wide legislation that establishes reasonable buffer zones between such mega gas stations and residential neighborhoods, schools, parks, and other sensitive land uses.

What is the relationship between the SCGC and Kensington Heights Civic Association (KHCA)?

In a word: symbiotic. Since early 2010 KHCA has been fighting to prevent the placement of the proposed gas station so near to Kensington Heights. Most of the members of the SCGC Coordinating Committee (SCGC-CC) are members of KHCA, were active in KHCA efforts to fight Costco's proposed location for the gas station, and will continue to work within KHCA in this effort. But the fight is more than a one-neighborhood issue. It is a question of protecting EVERYONE's neighborhood from ill-advised siting of such facilities. SCGC seeks to support the continuing battle thus far waged by KHCA and to engage activists across the county and state (and the country) to support this 'common good' cause.

Does SCGC Oppose Costco?

No! KHCA did not object to the building of the Costco warehouse store in Westfield Wheaton Plaza. Neither SCGC nor KHCA have opposed the placement of a Costco mega gas station in a suitable down-county location. But the proposed location within the Plaza and immediately adjacent to Kensington Heights, Stephen Knolls school and Kenmont Swim Club is NOT appropriate. Costco and Westfield should work with all agencies of MoCo to find an appropriate site.

What is a Mega Gas Station?

A VERY large one. A 'typical' gas station has 6-12 pumps and sells about 1.5 million gallons of gas per year. A large station (the type addressed by the recently-passed ZTA 12-07) may have a few more pumps, but the output is much larger - about 3.6 million gallons per year. The proposed Costco mega station would have 16 pumps and is expected to sell at least 12 million gallons/year. It would not be a neighborhood gas station: its clientele would be drawn from much of Montgomery County and the District of Columbia.

What are the potential impacts that so concern SCGC?

There are many and it is difficult to rank them as to 'seriousness'. But in overview, they are all related to the facts that such Costco mega gas stations typically have long lines of waiting cars, anywhere from 20-60, waiting with their engines idling,

and spewing gasoline fumes. Thus such stations create large amounts of air-borne pollutants, problems of noise, traffic congestion, etc., with the exact levels of these impacts depending on the precise siting of the station. And the proposed siting, in this case is so very close to homes (some as close as 125 feet), a recreational facility (the swim club, within about 300 feet) and, most problematic, a public school for medically fragile special needs children (Stephen Knolls school, within about 850 feet). To be a bit more specific:

- Air quality and Health Impacts: The emissions from the many cars idling/filling up at the proposed station will contain many noxious volatile components. Almost all are carcinogens whose effects are most pronounced on those within a few hundred feet of the sources. They also cause - or exacerbate - respiratory problems such as asthma, COPD, etc.

- Environmental impact: Many of the compounds in the fumes coming from a gas station are greenhouse gases - and thus add to the worldwide problems of climate change. Or more specific concern to our region are the potential adverse impacts on ground water quality. Gas leaks are a concern with any gas station and they are most serious for mega stations - which are de facto regional underground storage facilities. While Costco has a reputation for constructing its stations in conformance with the most rigid standards, the Wheaton Plaza location presents specific problems. Most Costco stations have a monitoring well that probes soil and water to determine if an underground leak of petroleum is occurring. This involves boring a hole in the ground and the proposed station will NOT have this protective device because a bore hole on that part of the Wheaton Mall hill might become a conduit to contamination-- a short cut to connecting oil and water. The geology of the service station hill, although not completely studied, includes a number of ground water formations (both shallow and deep), right under or close to where Costco's giant underground gas tanks would be placed. Some have described the area as a honeycomb of small streams, all of which eventually drain into larger ones and thence into the Potomac. The ground water under the hill will probably play an important role in future floods and droughts, and could significantly increase the severity of any petroleum product leak. Put most simply, the proposed site involves tricky and sensitive terrain - as reflected by the inability of Costco to sink a monitoring well without running unacceptable risks of major contamination.

- Traffic and Parking Problems: More of the same things with which we are all too familiar. Costco's store will bring more cars to the streets around the neighborhood and the gas station will make the situation worse. The parking is either inadequate or sufficient; no one can be sure and Costco/Westfield have argued it both ways.

- Pedestrian Safety: Pedestrians trying to access the Plaza from the southwest side will find it even more dangerous; those who want to walk to the nearby Metro station will probably give up.

- Noise Pollution: As with many other sources of noise, existing regulations as to decibel level or acceptable hours of operation may/may not be 'adequate', but they will not be enforced (indeed cannot be) and are thus irrelevant. The situation

(like the traffic issue) reminds one of the frog who cannot tolerate being immersed in boiling water, but will survive - for a while - if the temperature is increased slowly.

- Not Smart Growth: Encouraging even more people to drive to a dense urban area (in order to buy cheaper gas) is the complete antithesis of policies that seek to encourage the use of mass transit. Will people drive to the gas station, fill their tanks, and then park and walk over to the Wheaton Metro station?

- Not a Neighborhood Need: Existing laws require that any gas station be 'justified' on the basis of the needs of the surrounding neighborhood. They were written for small gas stations, more than 20 of which already serve the needs of Wheaton and Kensington. The proposed Costco facility is a Mega Gas Station intended to serve the needs of much of Montgomery County (and even some of the District of Columbia).

Our website has even more information: www.stopcostcogas.org

What is the Desired Outcome?

1. Costco and Westfield, with the assistance of the County Executive and the County Council (and all the agencies they control) should find a reasonable place for the gas station: a site that is AT LEAST 1000 feet from any homes, schools, parks, etc.

2. MoCo should revise ZTA 12-07 so that such buffer zones (1. above) are required everywhere in the County. And Maryland should pass similar legislation providing similar protection to every neighborhood in the state.