

Take Our Gas Station, Please

by

Mark R. Adelman

For those of you too young to recognize it, the title is a shameless takeoff on an old Henny Youngman comedy routine. But this story is not funny. Everyone loves a good David and Goliath a story, right? Well, maybe not Goliath. This one is about many David's and two Goliaths. In the interests 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. The Davids are numerous citizen activists of the Kensington Heights Civic Association (KHCA, kensingtonheightsmd.org) and, most recently, members of the Stop Costco Gas Coalition (SCGC, I am their Webmaster, 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 the County Executive, 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?

Try a 16 pump station dispensing some 12 million gallons of gas (and the included noxious, health-risk fumes) per year. And anywhere from 20-60 cars idling (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 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 NOT about a huge gas station being built nearly in their back yards. So they went to work. Nearly three years later, MoCo has passed a Zoning Text Amendment (ZTA), pushed by the civic activists - and others - that establishes 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 are not included - people who live in them don't inhale).

So Costco has to file a new application for a Special Exception. But they have figured out how to move the proposed gas station site a teenie bit to the east, satisfying the ZTA, but placing the proposed station even closer to some homes and to the school.

By now (October, 2012) everyone is getting very tired and just a little cranky. A group of civic activists (yours truly included) decided to form an umbrella group (SCGC) to expand the fight. This is not a NIMBY issue, 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'd 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 SCGC 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'. [In true civic activist tradition we are fighting over whether it is saving or protecting - and where to put the apostrophe.]

And now, while everyone waits for Costco to file a new SE application (or decide this is a fight they cannot afford to win), everyone is lobbying everyone they can think of and generally working like crazy. After all, with the elections over (for at least a week or so), what else have we got to do?

So there you have it - in a nutshell. And websites from which you can download more information than any sane person would want to read. But maybe you SHOULD at least consider the issue. Or consider the title of this article: would YOU like the mega gas station? Do you trust Costco and various government entities to decide?

I ran this article past several other Davids and they did not approve - jocularly is not appropriate to such a serious issue. [But I heard some snickers and I'm pretty sure my old friend Wayne Goldstein would like it.]

So let me suggest a different title: "Take Your Gas Station and ... "

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