



Retail

## **Welcome, Wal-Marts!**

Emily Lambert, 01.13.09, 12:52 PM ET

Chicago - What a difference a bad economy makes. Wal-Mart, the retailer routinely accused of destroying communities and neighborhoods, is facing less opposition according to a recent survey.

Of 1,000 adults who were interviewed nationwide in October and November, 56% said they would oppose a Wal-Mart in their community. That's down from 68% two years ago.

"People are afraid that economic development has come to a standstill," says Patrick Fox, president of Saint Consulting Group, the firm that conducted the interviews as part of its annual report on attitudes toward development. "The news is filled with economic doomsday data."

Saint's main business is organizing community campaigns for and against development.

Fox cautioned against reading too much into the numbers, saying that people who support a Wal-Mart in theory can change their tune when one is actually proposed for their neighborhood.

And Al Norman, the activist behind Sprawl-busters.com, says the level of community resistance to Wal-Mart has spiked sharply, not dropped. He says he expects at least 40% of any superstores that Wal-Mart proposes this year to be challenged, delayed or killed.

But the economy would appear to be helping Wal-Mart in its bid to promote supporters and minimize noisy opponents. The latter get firepower from groups and Web sites including Sprawl-busters.com, which describes how dozens of communities have fought off Wal-Marts.

There's also Walmartwatch.com, which has an instruction manual entitled "Battle-Mart: an online guide to fighting Wal-Mart in your community."

Consider a recent Wal-Mart win in Atascadero, Calif., a town of 28,000 people on the state's central coast. After a referendum vote in its favor, Wal-Mart is seeking environmental and city approvals for a store there.

It took two and a half years to get to this point. Neighbors formed an opposition group in 2006 after a newspaper report revealed that a Wal-Mart was in the works. Opponents set up a Web site and encouraged hundreds of people to write letters and turn out for hearings. They organized a dog walk to promote a walkable downtown.

They also proposed an initiative that would ban all superstores. The Nov.4, 2008, vote effectively became a referendum on Wal-Mart.

The company fought back with its own campaign. At a nearby store, it asked shoppers to voluntarily sign up for its Customer Action Network. A spokeswoman said more than 5,400 supporters signed up.

It also organized a support group of sorts for Wal-Mart supporters. A consultant for Wal-Mart led the meetings at a storefront across the street from where Wal-Mart wanted to build.

The meetings drew a dozen people, including retiree Donald Pense who spent a few hours putting up Wal-Mart signs on supporters' lawns because he worried the city would shrivel up without Wal-Mart's taxes.

At last reported count, Wal-Mart spent \$195,750 in cash and services in its campaign to defeat the measure. In November, 68% of voters voted in support of Wal-Mart.

Pense calls the vote "wonderful." He says the town had lost some retailers and a car dealership and seemed headed for broke.

Opposition spokesman Thomas Comar says that the economic crisis hurt his group's cause, but he would continue to work to prevent Wal-Mart from moving in.