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Leslieville's big-box battle

Retail giant vs the city at OMB

By SARAH GREEN, CITY HALL BUREAU

Signs proclaim "No Big Box in Leslieville" from windows of stores and homes across the east-end neighbourhood.

Behind the protests is a long simmering dispute between SmartCentres, which wants to build a \$200-million retail complex in the neighbourhood and the city.

The fight over the future of 7.5 hectares of land between Lake Shore Blvd. and Eastern Ave., just east of Pape Ave., goes to a showdown next Wednesday with the start of a 12-week hearing at the Ontario Municipal Board, where SmartCentres has appealed the city's refusal to rezone the lands.

"It's been very contentious," said local councillor Paula Fletcher.

A rally last month drew more than 300 residents concerned the large retailer would bring 7 million cars through their neighbourhood and shutter local businesses.

"This would destroy (the area) in the minds of my community," Fletcher said. "It's not a planning argument, but it's a very real life argument for people that live in the neighbourhood."

The property, now home to Toronto Film Studios which are moving to the nearby portlands, is designated as employment land.

"We're looking for value-added jobs, not minimum-wage, part-time jobs," Fletcher said.

A retail job is worth \$30,000 to the city's economy while a value-added job in the film or IT sector is worth \$106,000, she said.

"We're looking at hundreds of millions of dollars lost if we would simply allow this to go to retail."

SmartCentres officials say the plan creates jobs -- 1,800 when the shovels hit the ground as early as the fall of 2009 and 2,000 positions worth \$40- to \$60-million when the stores open in the 65,000-square-metre complex in 2011.

The plans are unlike suburban big box stores, SmartCentres v-p Tom Smith said. They call for two- and three-storey buildings, separated by a pedestrian walkway, sidewalk storefronts and 1,700 parking spaces tucked out of sight.

Wal-Marts typically anchor a SmartCentres development.