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LESLIEVILLE GETS ITS BIG-BOX FILL

By PAUL TEREFENKO

A meeting convened by Councillor Paula Fletcher to fill in locals about Smart!Centres' plans for a prime 7-hectare parcel on Eastern east of Leslie on May 17 confirmed the worst fears of residents: big box hell is just around the corner.

Warning: Smart!Centres plans to turn its 50 per cent share of the plot formerly occupied by Toronto Film Studios into a "power centre," in other words a bunch of really big stores concentrated in one place.

If the mall developer famous for car-oriented retail gets its way, the proposed mega-mix of retail will add up to 700,000 square feet and include 1,900 parking spots.

Hence, land that could be used for high-paying employers close to the core would be eaten up, an eventuality that has Fletcher fuming and the city battling Smart!Centres at the Ontario Municipal Board. The company wants the land rezoned for commercial and residential uses from its present industrial and manufacturing designation.

"We're trying to discourage the loss of employment lands," Fletcher tells the crowd of roughly 200 at the Ralph Thornton Centre. The city, she says, wants "creative jobs, environmentally sustainable jobs, responsible transportation, waterfront connectivity and protection of small business."

Residents, though, get no satisfaction from **Smart!Centres rep Tom Smith**, who occupies the hot seat and says nothing to allay the biggest fear of those in attendance -- that a Wal-Mart would be part of the mix. (The Smart!Centres website boasts that its malls are "strategically located in every major market across Canada, with the majority anchored by a Wal-Mart store.")

Instead, Smith says the company has "talked to a lot of retailers who've expressed interest in the area" but "there are no signed tenants."

It's less reassuring to hear Smith offer the disgruntled attendees such token goodwill gestures as "opportunities [for Smart!Centres] to work with the community and through the councillor," pledges to "learn from ideas" and the developer's "intent" to achieve LEED ratings.

It doesn't help his case that high-paid pro-development lobbyists, including **an ex-Lastman chief of staff**, says Fletcher, are already trying to get city lawyers to support Smart!Centres' plan.

Post-meeting, **Jenn Moxon** captures the skepticism around Smith's language: "Intention is such a safe word, because you can always change it." Leslieville gets its big-box fill



NOW MAGAZINE www.nowtoronto.com

EVERYTHING TORONTO. ONLINE.

MAY 24 - 30, 2007 | VOL. 26 NO. 38

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story URL: http://www.nowtoronto.com/issues/2007-05-24/news_cityinbrief2.php

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