

NATIONAL POST

Monday, April 14, 2008

No Big Box, rally chants

Developer appeals to OMB for retail complex in Leslieville

Presented by



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Published: Monday, April 14, 2008



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A grassroots movement to block a big-box retail development in the east end held a boisterous rally yesterday to urge the provincial government to step in and protect the land.

Leslieville residents and shop owners fear the proposed massive complex will ruin the vibrant, urban community that is just starting to come into its own.

"It's taken 10 years for Leslieville to get to where it is now, with shops and cafes and boutiques," said Dale Kowcenuk, a painter who attended yesterday's protest in a local park with a couple hundred other people. If it is ever constructed, Mr. Kowcenuk will be able to see an assortment of retail giants from his front door. "I don't know anyone who is for it," he said.

The City of Toronto has turned down the application by Smart! Centres to rezone the Leslieville land on Eastern Avenue for a retail complex about four times the size of the Canadian Tire on Leslie Street. Smart! Centres has appealed the decision to the Ontario Municipal Board, which has the power to overturn council.

Opponents want the Premier to make a "declaration of provincial interest," which would take the zoning appeal "out of the hands of the OMB," said Kelly Carmichael, who will represent the East Toronto Community Coalition at the upcoming OMB hearing.

The declaration is "a very rare thing," Ms. Carmichael acknowledged in an interview prior to the rally she helped organize. "We can only actually find six instances that it's ever been done before."

She cited one case in which the provincial government stepped in and quashed plans to build a mall on the lake shore in the west end.

Mayor David Miller has asked the province to intervene. It has until the end of Friday to decide. The OMB hearing is scheduled for May 21.

Yesterday, a host of speakers, who ranged from federal NDP leader Jack Layton to comedian Luba Goy of Royal Canadian Air Farce fame, encouraged opponents of the development to let the provincial government know where they stand. They stood under a banner that read, "Give Us Places to Grow, not Places to Park."

"Folks, this is going to be a tough fight. The company we're up against has massive financial resources and money is no object," said Mr. Layton, as he encouraged people to donate to the cause. The crowd chanted No Big Box. It booed as speakers forecast the development's impact, including more vehicle traffic through the neighbourhood, loss of small businesses and wasted waterfront real estate.

"We oppose volume retail. We have enough shopping in our community," said Ms. Carmichael, a graphic designer, of the sprawling complex that will provide 744,660 square feet of retail space. "This development isn't for us. They're putting 1,900 parking spots," she said, which would drastically increase traffic through the neighbourhood.

City councillor Paula Fletcher said the development site is on "high value" employment lands that were for film industry jobs-- which she said generate two-thirds more money for the local economy than the minimum wage retail jobs available at big-box stores.

Ms. Carmichael said Smart! Centres has not submitted a site plan application for the Leslieville development, but one proposed tenant mix shows a 180,000-square-foot Wal-Mart store, along with a home-improvement outlet.

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