

## Opinion

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Wal-Mart revisited

A stronger big box design law could help avert this mess

Wal-Mart foes in Muldoon won a victory in court, but they could end up losing in the neighborhood.

A Superior Court judge threw out the Anchorage Assembly's vote that approved rezoning 54 acres off DeBarr near Muldoon Road. Wal-Mart plans a new Wal-Mart and Sam's Club store there.

As part of the rezoning, the city and the Northeast Community Council negotiated all sorts of concessions. Wal-Mart agreed to add a park, build a boulevard-style road, and widen the green buffer between the stores and houses behind them.

All of that got tossed out with the court decision.

Without the rezoning, Wal-Mart can still build on 30-some acres on the Muldoon site that are already classified as industrial land. During the two-year battle over this proposed development, Wal-Mart officials said they thought they could squeeze two stores onto the smaller portion if necessary.

They haven't announced what they'll do in the aftermath of the court ruling.

Our question is, why should a neighborhood and the city still have to fight for concessions like a decent-sized strip of trees between a big retailer and a subdivision?

These matters should be written into law.

The "big box" ordinance that the Assembly passed in 2001 set some design standards, but not enough.

The goal is to prevent large retailers from building monolithic, blank-walled stores with massive parking lots like the Midtown Wal-Mart. The big box ordinance did result in friendlier, more interesting architecture on the fronts of buildings.

The 2001 standards were meant to be temporary. Seven years later, we're still waiting for the update.

The city is rewriting the whole zoning code, Title 21, and in that document, the large retail design standards proposed are stronger, says city planning director Tom Nelson.

The new version of Title 21 calls for improved buffers between developments and neighbors. It calls for pedestrian walkways from store entrances across big parking lots. It encourages south-facing buildings with facades. It ensures proper lighting outside stores.

These provisions have been a long time coming and are overdue. We need to get them into law before all the land in the Anchorage Bowl is already taken up with lower quality development.

**BOTTOM LINE:** The city needs to get moving on improved design standards for big, boxy buildings like the Wal-Marts.

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