

President's Note

The Real Costs



WHEN WE PLACED THE ENTIRE STATE OF VERMONT ON our 2004 list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places, we expected the announcement to generate plenty of comment—and it did. Although most of the response has been positive and supportive, some commentators have completely missed the point of the listing. I'd like to set the record straight.

Our aim is not to single out Wal-Mart as "the enemy." We simply want to remind Vermonters—as well as people in every other state—that they have the right to decide what kind of community they want to live in. They can choose to allow a mammoth superstore to be built outside town, but it's a choice they should make with a full understanding of the consequences.

In the 11 years since Vermont first appeared on our endangered list, Wal-Mart has opened four outlets in the state. Three of them are relatively small and sited in or near town centers. That kind of development—modestly scaled stores that complement existing businesses—is what we'd like Wal-Mart to undertake elsewhere. But instead, the company now plans to saturate Vermont with seven new stores in outlying locations, each with a minimum of 150,000 square feet. With their huge buying power and marketing budgets, superstores like these can obliterate local businesses and drain the economic and social life out of traditional downtowns.

Communities from coast to coast have learned to their sorrow (and usually too late) that low prices often mask enormous hidden costs. The new stores may generate jobs and tax revenues—but will they offset the jobs and revenues lost when downtown businesses fold? The new megamarts may produce impressive sales figures—but will the money stay in town, as it generally does with locally owned businesses, or will most of it fly to a corporate headquarters in another state? Shoppers may pay less at the checkout stand—but how much are they paying for the new roads, water and sewer lines, and police and fire protection that the stores require?

We are not, as some commentators have asserted, primarily interested in keeping Vermont intact as a quaint getaway for "leaf peepers" and weekend skiers. Although it's important to preserve the history and sense of place that attract tourists (and tourists' dollars), it's Vermonters themselves—the people who own the downtown pharmacies and hardware stores and the local residents they serve—who have the most to lose if their state is overrun by sprawl.

How much paved-over open space, downtown disinvestment, traffic congestion, loss of locally owned business, and destruction of community character are people willing to accept in exchange for discount shopping? To answer that question, Vermonters—especially those in Wal-Mart's seven target towns—need to engage in a frank and open debate on the issue of superstore sprawl. That debate is going on right now, and I'm proud that our 11 Most Endangered listing helped spark it.