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TESTIMONY REGARDING DSP-15020-01 – CAPITAL PLAZA WALMART

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak. My name is Clareen Heikal. I am co-chair of Progressive Cheverly, a local, all volunteer organization committed to education and advocacy on issues affecting our local community.

In our letter to the Planning Board dated April 25, 2016 we opposed the expansion of the Walmart at Capital Plaza into a Super Walmart store and urged MNCPPC not to approve the Detailed Site Plan (DSP) application. I will here briefly summarize our objections which are threefold:

First, Walmart has been a very poor corporate neighbor, despite many promises.

For 9 years the health, safety, and well-being of neighborhood and shoppers have been compromised by Walmart's lack of adequate maintenance, security and management of their store and parking lot, resulting in excessive parking lot crime, shopping carts strewn through the parking lot and neighborhood, poor customer service, poorly stocked shelves, and dangerously cluttered aisles. Walmart also claimed they would bring economic benefits to our community, but failed to live up to that promise as well. This store has been the site of employee protests about wages, lack of access to benefits, and working conditions. **If healthy communities are in any way the responsibility of the Planning Board and the planning process, this record of behavior should not be rewarded with a massive expansion of retail capacity.**

Second, Capital Plaza remains in significant part a wasteland after many years. This expansion, with full grocery space, is offered piecemeal with no plan that this will change the conditions in the rest of the shopping mall, let alone bring about a vibrant Town Center to benefit the community as envisioned in the 2010 Central Annapolis Road Approved Sector Plan.

The staff report asserts that this expansion will lay the groundwork for the creation of a revitalized, pedestrian, bike and transit friendly shopping plaza with a variety of retail shops and restaurants. We have waited to see positive development of the rest of the 39 acre vacant mall since it opened 9 years ago. The developer of Capital Plaza has consistently maintained that a full service grocery store is needed to generate the traffic necessary to attract business to the location. However, by Walmart's account to the community, the Capital Plaza Walmart, is already the most heavily shopped store in this area, without a full service grocery store! Why has that not been enough "traffic" to have encouraged development? Why will things be different now?

While we do not place all the burden of the condition of Capital Plaza on the shoulders of Walmart, neither do we absolve them of any responsibility. **With a true commitment to community enhancement and the market power of one of the largest corporations on the planet, we believe a lot more could have been accomplished in nine years.**

Third, we object to the decision to proceed under DSP rules, rather than treat this as a special exception. We are not land use planning experts, but we continue to view as extremely problematic the decision, without any public involvement or knowledge, to allow the DSP process in place of the Special Exception process

Despite the above arguments, the staff of the Planning Board is recommending approval of this expansion, with conditions. However, we believe several other conditions are necessary. Specifically, we believe as a condition of approval of the DSP. Walmart should:

- Establish clear requirements for a well-managed, clean, and safe store that shows respect for the community, its customers, and its employees including an effective, visible security presence in the parking lot adjacent to the Walmart with adequate lighting, good store management that provides a clean and aisle free store, employees who are paid a living-wage and are well-trained making the store a desirable place to work and an asset to the community.
- Build an expansion that meets LEED certification, incorporates maximum use of on-site solar energy, and state of the art stormwater management systems, and sustainable landscaping with native plantings.
- Maintain the conditions in the original 2006 agreement between Walmart and the community, including no sale of alcohol, guns, or ammunition, no 24-hour operation, work to address traffic congestion and security in adjoining neighborhoods, maintain strong parking lot security, promote local hiring and workforce development, create an attractive facade and landscaping, establish

an energy efficient and environmentally innovative site, and engage in ongoing dialogue with the Community Standards Coalition regarding these issues. In particular, in regard to 24-hour store operations, the current store hours of 6:00 am – midnight should not be exceeded.

- Include space for community meetings and a cafe -- both with free WiFi.
- Change public transportation routing to allow a bus stop next to the store instead of across the parking lot next to Route 450. The current bus stop location places an extra burden on the many people who rely on public transportation to access Walmart. This will only get worse with a full service grocery store.

We believe that it is impossible to think of approving a Walmart expansion without addressing the shopping mall as a whole. This is especially true since the community continues to be deeply distressed by a Capital Plaza that is vacant except for the Walmart, a McDonalds and a bank. The 39 acres is an eyesore.

At an April 27th community meeting held by several mayors on the Walmart and Capital Plaza it was clear that the 60 or 70 people present were very frustrated and angry with current conditions in the store and the shopping plaza as a whole. In addition to wanting a better run Walmart, as discussed above, they wanted more than a hodgepodge of low-end retail and restaurants but a vibrant town center that offers quality options both in retail and restaurants. The proposed Royal Farms gas station, for example, does not seem to be a welcome addition to the Mall given that there are several gas stations nearby on Route 450. To that end, we include the following issues that need to be addressed in this process:

- There needs to be a concrete plan for the rest of the shopping center, with Nellis Corporation working with community leaders so that proposed development will lead to a Town Center that is a real community asset.
- Make sure that as Capital Plaza expands so does an internal pedestrian sidewalk system allowing for safe pedestrian traffic between all the buildings.
- After all these years of promises, we would like to see real commitment to bring in other businesses. We were pleased to see that Nellis is proposing to build a brick and mortar building to attract new businesses. But we have heard promises before. Where are the letters of intent?

Thank you for your consideration of these issues.

Clareen Heikal and Margie Burns
Co-Chairs Progressive Cheverly