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NEW YORK
nymag.com



A Day of Wal-Mart Bashing, With a Side of Ground Zero Mosque Protests (Remember Those?)

2/4/11 at 07:30 AM

New York's City Council held a meeting on Thursday to determine how the construction of a Wal-Mart would affect the city. But first it had to revisit the last building that was supposedly going to disgrace the skyline: the ground zero mosque.

About fifteen minutes before the meeting was slated to begin, people started screaming at each other across Chambers Street. On one side, about 100 people were lined up to get in, most of them in opposition to Wal-Mart's plan. On the other were a dozen people who were vocally opposing the Park51 Islamic community center in downtown Manhattan. Had they come to the wrong event? What the hell was going on?

As it turns out, the mosque protesters had come because Pam Geller told them to. Geller is the firebrand and figurehead who led protests against Park51 last year. On Thursday she asked all of her blog's New York readers to join her at the City Council hearing.

A group of the Gellerites had assembled on the steps of Tweed Courthouse to discuss the unfairness of letting Muslims build a mosque but at the same time preventing capitalists from building a megastore. "Today, they are holding hearings to ban Wal-Mart, jobs, and the cheap prices from New Yorkers," Geller said. "But they are helping to erect a ground zero mosque." As Tom Holloran, a 63-year-old who heeded Geller's call, told Intel, "You want to ban an American store and yet you want to allow a mosque with people who killed 3,000 Americans to exist in the neighborhood?" Framed between two American flags, Geller's people were carrying cardboard signs, one side reading "YES TO WALMART," and the other "NO TO GROUND ZERO MOSQUE."

Finally, the crowd on the other side of the street had somebody to scream at. "Wal-Mart's racist and so are you!" "Mosque yes, Wal-Mart no!" "We shall overcome!" The mosque opponents responded with "Down with socialism! Down with unions!" and a stirring rendition of the national anthem. And so they went, back and forth, each side convinced that they were defending the civic fabric of New York.

But for Rose Durante, a 54-year-old from Boro Park, this wasn't just about abstract principles — it was about keeping her job. Durante unpacks grocery trucks at the Pathmark in Boro Park and worried that if Wal-Mart comes to New York, her wages will take a hit, or, worse, Pathmark will lose business and she'll get laid off. "People talk about the consumer and how it's better for them. But they don't talk about the worker," she said.

When the hearing finally started and the crowd filed in, they learned what had been reported in the press ahead of time: Wal-Mart was a no-show. The retailer had long ago decided the City Council was a lost cause, in part because Council Speaker Christine Quinn is prone to saying things like, "To me, Wal-Mart is definitely not welcome in New York City; it is a union-busting, tax-evading, wage-correcting, job-destroying, civil-rights-abusing, food-stamps-denying multinational corporation that has no place in New York City." It also realized that the City Council can't actually stop Wal-Mart from moving in.

So instead of wasting time trying to win over the Council, Wal-Mart has decided to charm regular New Yorkers. It has launched a major PR campaign, including mailers, radio ads, and a social-networking strategy on Facebook and YouTube. For now, the campaign is a general one — Wal-Mart has not officially announced a proposed location

(though the Brooklyn neighborhood of East New York appears to be the most likely). Its purpose is to get New Yorkers used to the idea of a Wal-Mart, making the point that Target and Costco have moved in, and nobody seems to mind.

Both Wal-Mart and its City Council adversaries are convinced that a Wal-Mart in Chicago is the perfect example to convince the people that Wal-Mart will save or ruin New York. Chicago's Wal-Mart would be most analogous to New York's; built in a struggling neighborhood in 2006, Wal-Mart says it led to more economic development surrounding the store, with 22 new stores opening nearby and 428 new jobs in the area (not just including Wal-Mart).

Its detractors are dubious. Public Advocate Bill de Blasio, in a survey of academic research on Wal-Mart's economic impact, cited research that "after a single Wal-Mart opened in Chicago in September 2006, 82 of the 306 small businesses in the surrounding neighborhood had gone out of business by March 2008."

The Council largely shares de Blasio's concerns. Its first witness at the hearing was Professor David Merriman, a University of Illinois at Chicago professor who filed a report about the effect of the Chicago Wal-Mart. There is "no evidence of a stimulating effect on new businesses," Merriman said.

But soon Council member Daniel Halloran was questioning Merriman's research, poking holes in its methodology and the limits of its findings. Merriman was forced to conclude that his study contained no evidence of a net job loss in the Chicago neighborhood after Wal-Mart moved in, either.

Eventually, realizing nothing was going to be decided today and numbed by more than two hours of panels and questions, Daily Intel decided to leave the hearing. As we put on our coat and looked out the window, we saw the anti-mosque crew was still across the street. Representatives from Wal-Mart, the focus of the day's political theatrics, were still nowhere to be seen.

By: Chadwick Matlin

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