

Jesuit Objections to Locating Wal-Mart at Woodlawn/Woolwich

The Jesuits have deep roots in Guelph. A year before the city was founded in 1827, a member of John Galt's party was married here by a Jesuit. We have laboured continuously in Guelph for 152 years. Jesuits built the Church of Our Lady and also Sacred Heart. We invited the Sisters of St. Joseph to establish hospital care, and the Loretto Sisters to establish their Academy in Guelph. For 91 years we have conducted our ministry of spiritual training at our Ignatius Jesuit Centre just north of the City.

This ministry is now threatened by the proposal to locate Guelph's Wal-Mart at Woodlawn/Woolwich, just south of the Jesuit Centre. Our rationale for opposing this location has three points: (1) A Wal-Mart at this location would inevitably attract several other "big box" stores to build on adjacent lands, quickly creating a "regional" shopping area at least as large as the Stone Road Corridor. (2) Since Guelph is now growing rapidly in every direction except north, this is the wrong location for a commercial node destined to draw customers from the far reaches of the City. (3) Such a mega cluster of big box stores would threaten our spiritual and ecological activities at the Jesuit Centre, and would also degrade the sacred atmosphere of both Woodlawn and Marymount cemeteries.

We do not object to Wal-Mart or any other big box store coming to Guelph; we just want them to locate in accordance with sound city planning principles, as described later.

We believe we have a strong case, based on these three points, to present to the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) later this year. But Guelph City Council has now made winning that case much more difficult. First, the City brokered a settlement agreement among parties, ignoring the Jesuit request to include Wal-Mart in the negotiations. Had Wal-Mart been included, there was a chance a deal could have been struck for Wal-Mart to build elsewhere in Guelph to the satisfaction of most Guelphites. Instead the developers reached the deal one would expect them to reach—everyone gets to build what they want where they want.

Secondly, on May 25, 2004 Council reversed its former opposition to the Wal-Mart development at the OMB and will now support the developer. Prior to his decision, Council received more e-mails asking them to continue to oppose Wal-Mart than Council has ever received on any other question. Further, 36 of the 42 delegations that addressed Council on May 25 also asked Council to continue its opposition. Despite this, only Councillors Downer, Laidlaw, and Burcher supported the Jesuit position.

1. Wal-Mart Development Will Inevitably Become a Regional Shopping Area

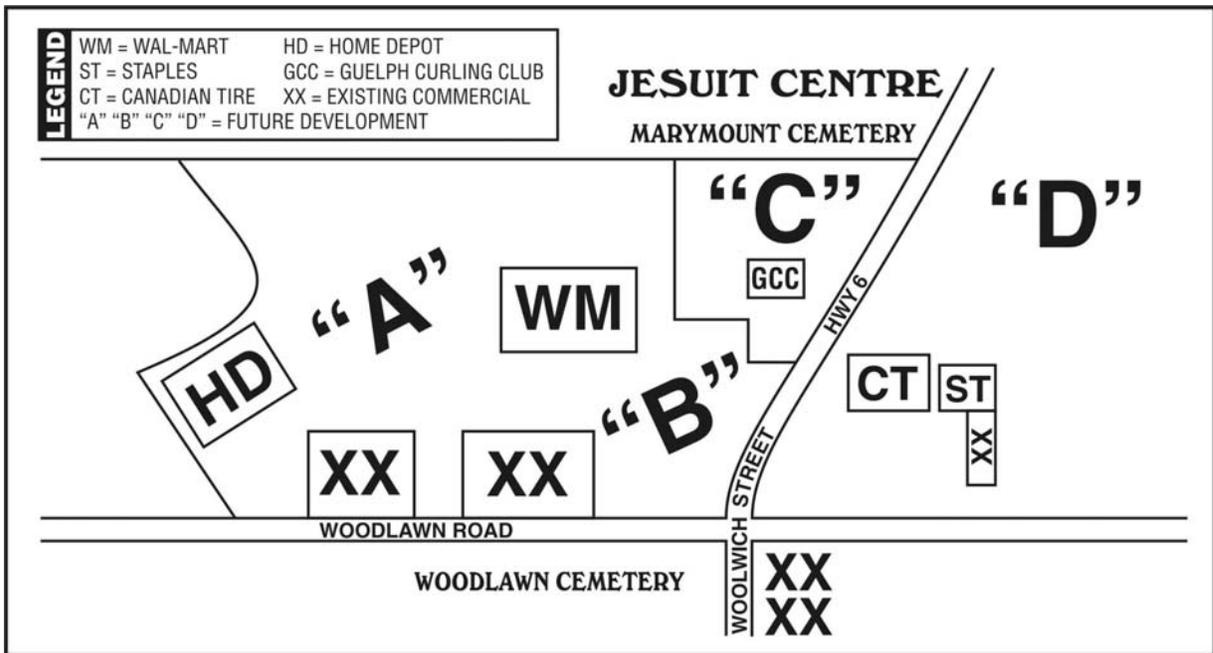
Guelph's Official Plan (OP) is the city's master planning document. The OP specifies what type of development should occur in all parts of the city to best serve the common good of all citizens. Excluding the downtown as a special area, the OP outlines a three level hierarchy of progressively larger shopping nodes. Dozens of *Neighbourhood* nodes (corner stores, coffee shops) are dotted throughout the City. *Community* nodes, such as Willow West or Eramosa/Stevenson are planned to serve the shopping needs of broader sections of the City. A *Regional* node is expected to serve consumers from the entire city and beyond. Currently the Stone Road Corridor is our only *regional* retail area.

Please examine the map below of the Woodlawn/Woolwich intersection. Presently this is a *community* commercial node composed of Canadian Tire and Staples (CT and ST on the map) in the northeast

quadrant and other existing commercial businesses (labelled XX on the map) west on Woodlawn and south on Woolwich. In order to secure the city's approval, Wal-Mart's developer, First Professional, has billed its plan for a Wal-Mart (WM) as a mere expansion of this existing *community* retail cluster at Woodlawn/Woolwich.

But this is not the case. If approved, this development will inevitably grow into Guelph's second *regional* commercial cluster, rivalling the Stone Road Corridor in size and variety. Wal-Mart alone will draw customers from all over the City and beyond, which is the defining feature of a *regional* centre. More importantly, Wal-Mart is what marketing experts call an **attractor** (an anchor store that attracts other big box retailers), and a **seed** (an anchor that always spawns additional commercial growth). Retailers want to locate where a constant stream of consumers can be expected. Wal-Mart, as the world's largest retailer, always draws a strong flow of consumers eager for discount prices. Other retailers, therefore, like to build around Wal-Mart in order to share Wal-Mart's customer base.

Even before Wal-Mart is approved, this pile-on phenomenon, which the Jesuit Centre has long predicted and feared, has begun. Home Depot (HD on the map) intends to build on the former Desert Inn property. There are many other big box retailers not yet in Guelph who tend to locate in cities of our size, especially when the population is increasing rapidly. For example, Future Shop, IKEA, Costco, Toys-R-U's, Leon's, Michael's, Linens 'n Things, The Brick, Best Buy, Rona, Price Club, Old Navy, or Golf Town may be considering building a store in Guelph.



Woodlawn/Woolwich will not accommodate all of these retailers, but it is relatively easy to predict where several of them may choose to build in a second stage of development. Area "A" on the map, between Wal-Mart and Home Depot, could become another big box store. First Professional has deleted a long-promised and much-desired Supermarket in area "B" from its plans, opening up this area for another big box. And area "C", currently a sports field leased by the city from the Guelph Curling

Club (GCC on the map), could accommodate another. After this second stage, the Woodlawn/Woolwich retail power centre will probably consist of seven big box stores (Canadian Tire, Staples, Wal-Mart, Home Depot, and three others). In addition, several smaller boxes, not shown on the map, would be built among the big boxes, and others possibly in redevelopment along Woodlawn and Woolwich.

And in the longer term, there is room for a third stage of development to accommodate several further big box stores on the farmland east of Highway 6, north of Canadian Tire, area “D” on the map, a very large area that can accommodate several big boxes. And beyond this, the lands of the Jesuit Centre itself would become a target for commercial development.

Just down the road at the intersection of Highway 24 and 401, we have a fine example of the type of power centres First Professional is constructing across Canada. It started with a Wal-Mart, the same size and shape as the one planned for Guelph, and now there are more than a dozen boxes on the same site, with more than 25 tenants. This Cambridge Wal-Mart site is a model for the regional node likely to emerge at Woodlawn/Woolwich.

2. A Regional Shopping Node at Guelph’s Northern City Limits is Bad City Planning

In 2001, when our previous City Council rejected the Woodlawn/Woolwich location for Wal-Mart, the primary reason for their vote given by the majority of councillors was their expectation that a *regional* centre would emerge there, and that this would not be good planning given Guelph’s growth pattern.

Presently Guelph is growing eastward, westward, and especially southward towards the 401, and there is plenty of room for further development in these directions on lands annexed into the city in 1993. Guelph is not growing northward. In fact, the northern city limits have remained essentially unchanged since the 1960’s, except east of the Speed River.

For this pattern of growth, the least convenient location for our second *regional* retail cluster is north central Guelph at Woodlawn/Woolwich. This location maximizes the average travel time and distance for present and future Guelphites; and it also maximizes the congestion of traveling through the city to reach Wal-Mart and the other big box stores it will attract to Woodlawn/Woolwich.

Neither the Jesuit Centre nor other parties opposing the Woodlawn/Woolwich development at the OMB want to prevent Wal-Mart building in Guelph. We simply want big box stores to conform to the city’s Official Plan, which provides for this type of development elsewhere, notably at Imperial/Paisley or Gordon/St. Clair. Without objection Wal-Mart could have located there years ago, and all big box retailers will continue to be welcome at those locations even if Council and the OMB reject Woodlawn/Woolwich as an appropriate site for a *regional* commercial area.

3. A Regional Shopping Node is Incompatible with the Cemeteries and the Jesuit Centre

Obviously, the traffic and noise and hubbub of a big box power centre is physically incompatible with the peace and serenity people expect at Woodlawn and Marymount cemeteries; and also with the quiet solitude that draws retreatants seeking an encounter with God in prayer at the Jesuit Centre.

But there is also a deeper social incompatibility, which can only be appreciated by stepping into the realm of mystical spirituality and religious symbolism.

An enduring aspect of the Judeo-Christian tradition is an invitation **to leave behind the concerns of this world** in order **to experience the Divine in solitude**, in the depth of our being. The Israelites were

driven out of Egypt and were spiritually transformed wandering in desert solitude for 40 years. Jesus went into the desert for 40 days of mystical experience, and often retreated to a quiet place in nature to pray. Early Christian mystics are called the Desert Fathers because they stepped away from urban life to find God in remote solitude. And ever since, men and women have left the preoccupations of normal life to contemplate the Divine in monasteries and retreat houses located in peaceful, bucolic settings. Another tradition associates “high places” as the typical location where humans report encountering God. Moses met Yahweh on Mount Sinai. Judaism built its temple, where God resided in the Holy of Holies, on the Temple Mount. Jesus was transfigured on Mount Tabor. Mount Athos is the pre-eminent monastic cluster for Orthodox Christians, as is *Monte Cassino* for Roman Catholics. Thus, it is not by accident that the Jesuits located the Church of our Lady and the Jesuit Centre on “high places.”

In terms of this ancient understanding of the sacred as a high place to which people retreat to experience God in solitude, **the Jesuit Centre is a sacred space.** We teach a form of mysticism called Ignatian Contemplation. Our Spiritual Directors, listening for hours each day to our retreatants’ descriptions of their experiences of the Divine provoked by our techniques and our land, are continually awed by what they hear. But our retreatants are not monks. Our purpose is to send them back into the world, refreshed, and with prayer techniques to assist them to find God in all things.

It is easy to sense the sacred on our 600 acres of farmland, bush, and provincially significant wetland. Marden Creek meanders through our land, flowing into the Speed River (our eastern boundary) at the southeast corner of our property. The Guelph Lake Conservation Area is our eastern neighbour. Because we experience our land as sacred, we care for it accordingly. We use only organic farming methods. We preserve our wetlands, decreasing field size when required. We continually plant trees. All these measures increase the biodiversity of the life around us. Our farm is crisscrossed with solitary trails for prayerful walking. We welcome others to experience God through our land, including a group of Aboriginal Canadians who maintain a sweat lodge facility at the Jesuit Centre.

Mega shopping plazas, as monuments of consumerism, are the symbolic opposite of these spiritual values. Consumerism is the cultural myth that the human spirit can find personal well-being, social fulfillment and integration through non-essential, conspicuous consumption. It invites a lifestyle of based on shopping to quiet the needs created by marketing. It invites us to perpetually seek more and bigger and better versions of what we already have. Consumerism masks the need we all have to turn inward to encounter God immanent at our core. This call to find satisfaction in acquisitions masks the call of the Spirit to find God within. The big box spirituality defining meaning and value in possessions is incompatible with the Jesuit spirituality defining meaning and value in seeking the Divine in all things. Therefore, a Wal-Mart anchored *regional* retail complex is socially incompatible adjacent to the Jesuit Centre.

Provincial planning principles and Guelph’s Official Plan hold that new development should not be approved if it is incompatible with pre-existing land usages. Therefore, the Woodlawn/Woolwich development should not be allowed to threaten almost 100 years of Jesuit tradition north of Guelph.

Thank you for your attention. Please feel welcome to visit our property at any time to enjoy and be refreshed by its beauty and the solitude it provides.

James W. Profit, S.J

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