



## Setting limits for retail size

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Staff Writer

— SARANAC LAKE "" A public discussion weighed relative values of big box store convenience and small town charm.

The communities of Saranac Lake and the Town of Harrietstown are examining the option of a retail space cap. Poverty, sprawl and smart growth were points repeated as 33 people shared opinions in four-minute turns at a microphone.

Ten elected officials from both municipalities sat in the town hall and listened Tuesday night.

### SETTING LIMITS

The proposal on the table, researched by members of the Save Saranac Lake Coalition and Sound Adirondack Growth Alliance, suggests a 40,000-square-foot limit for one retail space.

It's about the area of a football field.

A shopping plaza would max out at 68,000 square feet.

The proposed cap would be in place for two years, while the town and village finish revisions to a comprehensive plan.

Jamie Konkoski, a proponent of the initiative, introduced it with PowerPoint slides listing potentially harmful impacts of oversized retail on the local tax base, infrastructure, local business and tourism.

A mega store with 125,000 square feet generates an estimated 7,500 car trips daily with more on Saturdays, she said, yet it delivers a net loss of quality jobs.

And tourism studies show visitors come for the surrounding wilderness and small town character of Saranac Lake.

"This is what we sell," she said, showing a slide of a river surrounded by woods.

"Our customers will not buy this," she said, showing a slide of a parking lot beside a box store.

But it briefly mentioned several other heavily tourism-dependent areas that have set retail caps, including North Elba.

### PRECEDENT

In 1998, the Town of North Elba set the same cap proposed in Harrietstown for retail space.

The zoning regulation emerged a year after Wal-Mart bid unsuccessfully to construct a large store at the edge of Lake Placid village.

Two years ago, Wal-Mart proposed a 121,000-square-foot store at the outskirts of Saranac Lake, but was unable to purchase a town-owned sand lot.

The mega chain's interest polarized Saranac Lake and resulted in a sweeping change of leadership at the polls.

It also spurred a smart-growth initiative.

### RETAIL NEED

Rick Gonyea, representing a group called the Citizens for the Advancement of Retail Development, offered counterpoint.

Gonyea said they had no PowerPoint presentation, but he did collect 2,400 names on a petition supporting a request for a major retailer "to come in."

He said a cap would turn retailers away.

"The area needs growth; you need a store for a foundation."

As people spoke, a sense of urgency to build community around a good decision emerged.

Annette Schuller encouraged a balance between 120,000 square feet of retail space and no store at all.

"I have seen the negative effect of unbridled sprawl," she said.

Gail Brill, a founding member of the Community Store, encouraged people to take stock and build their own store.

Mark Kurtz, a spokesman for SAGA, said the size cap being proposed is not really very small.

"A size cap encourages retail development," he said, "and keeps something oversized and out of proportion out of our community."

Shawn Boyer flatly opposed the retail cap and encouraged a public referendum on the issue.

"This area's not going to turn into Las Vegas," he said.

Mary Ellen Keith, supervisor of the neighboring Town of Franklin, said access to affordable goods was very important.

"I tell you, there's the haves and the have-nots. We need to think of the people that don't have. Why cater to tourists? We're here 365 days a year."

Saranac Lake Mayor Thomas Michael said the meeting opened a serious discussion that needs to be continued.

Harrietstown Supervisor Larry Miller looked for the devil in the details.

"I'm torn," he said. "I'm really not sure which way to go on this retail cap. Maybe 40,000 square feet is not big enough when you consider back-room space and stocking."

Tri-Lakes area residents can weigh in on the issue by sending comments to town and village officials either by mail or by e-mail.

"Our two boards will sit down and decide where to go with this," Miller said.

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