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SUPPORTERS PUSH FOR RETAIL CAP IN SL, H-TOWN

Supporters of a temporary cap on the size of retail stores in Saranac Lake and Harrietstown outnumbered opponents of the measure at a public meeting on the issue Tuesday night.

Most of the roughly twenty people who spoke supported a proposed two-year interim cap of 40,000 square feet for a single store or 68,000 square feet for a shopping center.

Annette Shuler, the first to comment, said she didn't want Saranac Lake to become another town with "unbridled sprawl." "We can grow economically without a 120,000 square foot store," she said. "We can strike a balance. It does not have to be all or nothing."

Earlier, Jamie Konkoski of the Save Saranac Lake Coalition delivered a ten-minute presentation to the audience of area residents and town and village board members. She said the interim cap provides breathing room as a committee works on the new comprehensive plan for the town and village.

Konkoski argued that large retailers can create a drain on public services, increase traffic congestion, hurt small businesses and detract from the small-town character that makes Saranac Lake a tourist destination.

She said the retail cap, which is the same as the cap in place in North Elba and Lake Placid, will allow the community to keep its identity. "It will discourage certain types of development, mostly mega-retailers not willing to adapt their businesses to small town economies," she said. "A size cap however will encourage small and medium retailers that help diversify the local economy with choices and price competition everyone benefits from."

After Konkoski made her pitch, Rick Gonyea of Vermontville, who led the local effort in support of Wal-Mart's proposed Saranac Lake supercenter, delivered arguments against a retail cap.

He said the proposal would inhibit growth. "The cap would turn people away and that's the part I'm concerned about," he said. "I don't want to see people turned away. It could be something that benefits this area. We need to start thinking of everybody in this area, not just a certain few."

Gonyea wasn't the only opponent of the retail cap who described it as being proposed by small group of people. Shawn Boyer of Saranac Lake suggested a referendum on the measure. "Small groups should not decide what the whole of Saranac Lake should have here, and that seems to be what's been happening,"

he said.

But those against the cap were in the minority last night.

Keith Wells was one of several people who said the retail cap will allow the community, not a developer, to control its destiny. “A retail size cap provides guidelines for developers that come to this community and allows them to complete on an even playing field,” he said. “They will begin to understand the community character we’re trying to defend and the smart growth we wish to encourage.”

Other supporters, like Mark Kurtz of the Sound Adirondack Growth Alliance, said the proposed cap is not that small. It’s roughly the same size as the four existing plazas in the Tri-Lakes Area, he said, adding that large retailers can build smaller stores. “A lot of them, including Wal-Mart, builds 40,000 square foot stores,” he said. “[The cap] would still allow for the stores to build, but because of the smaller size they’ll have to be competitive. They’ll be playing on a more even field.”

After taking public comment, the only town or village board member who gave a clear indication of his opinion on the issue was Harrietstown Councilman Brian McDonnell, who said he supports a retail cap.

Town Supervisor Larry Miller said he was torn. “I firmly believe there should be some limits, but I don’t personally believe that 40,000 square feet for a store is enough,” he said.

Village Mayor Tom Michael told the audience that it’s important to foster competition and create shopping choices. After the meeting, Michael said he supports the temporary size cap. “I think it’s a good interim measure to help our comprehensive planning committee do some study on it so we have permanent language in our land use code in the future to help us regulate that size development,” he said.

Both the mayor and supervisor said they expect their boards to consider the proposal in the coming weeks. A joint meeting could potentially be called at some point.

-Chris Knight

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