

GUEST COLUMN

Supermarket showdown

BY PAT DREVENY

Ask Hyde Parkers where they buy food, and it's often a sore subject. It's wonderful that we have fresh, locally raised fare each summer at the Hyde Park Farmers' Market. But otherwise, we have to rely on a single supermarket, Stop & Shop. The main complaint I hear is that it's too expensive, with prices driven up by lack of competition. Consequently, many residents drive to Red Hook, Kingston or Poughkeepsie to shop.

Why am I, as chairwoman of the Hyde Park Democratic Committee, writing about grocery stores? Because access to healthy, affordable food is a quality-of-life issue.

For most of us, food is among our top-three monthly budget items. As a Democrat, I believe that people should have input on decisions that impact their quality of life, and I wanted to take a moment to inform residents about the supermarket scuffles going on behind the scenes in Hyde Park.

Many residents know that Stop & Shop is planning a move across Route 9 to the old Ames building. Thanks to the planning board's insistence, the entire plaza will be remodeled, not just the Ames side, which should help attract new businesses. Approval is expected early next month, and the final design will make for a much more attractive entrance to our town.

The Stop & Shop move still leaves us with only one supermarket, though, plus another newly empty big box when they move.

What many people don't know is that Shop Rite was ready to open up in the center of town. The owners of Park Plaza have been putting together designs for a supermarket to go in behind McDonald's, next to the vacant Amish Market. Shop Rite had signed a letter of intent to move in that space.

As someone who bought fish, meat and produce frequently when the Amish Market was still operating, I believe that a supermarket in the town center would be the magnet needed to revitalize our downtown. When they were open, I found myself in the town center a lot – and once parked, I'd walk around to pick up my dry cleaning and pet food, even stop into one of the many restaurants. So, with a new supermarket, empty storefronts could fill with new businesses that would piggyback off the shoppers drawn to the town center to shop for food.

These plans appear to have been derailed because upon taking office, Supervisor Tom Martino and the town council began courting any and all retail development for the St. Andrew's parcel opposite the Culinary Institute. It's unlikely a supermarket would build in the town center if it has to compete with one at St. Andrew's.

The town's comprehensive plan, adopted under Republican Yancy McArthur, specifies tourism-related development only in the Bellefield zone where the St. Andrew's parcel is located. But at the town board/workshop on Monday, the board announced its plans to change the zoning. So, while elected officials are making back-room deals on the Bellefield district, the people of Hyde Park are left with one supermarket.

Most of us would like another supermarket, and we may not care much where it goes. But we should. Allowing major retail development at St. Andrew's that competes directly with businesses in the existing town center will leave it a ghost town. If you are concerned about all the empty storefronts in town, then this is an either/or choice. We can either have a strong town center, or we can watch all new retail development go to St. Andrews. Not both – our population and demographics just can't support both.

Don't get us wrong – most Democrats are all for new development to expand the tax base, and yes, at St. Andrew's. But it's important that this area is planned to complement, not compete with, the town center. A supermarket in the heart of town would still increase the tax base but would also revitalize the downtown, helping businesses currently located there and attracting more.

We must ask ourselves what matters to us as a community. As a Democrat, I believe that we should all have a voice in the choices that affect quality of life in our town. Are your representatives seeking your input? The Democrats are. What matters to you as a Hyde Parker? We want to know: hydeparkdems@gmail.com.

Pat Dreveny is chairwoman of the Hyde Park Democratic Party.

Hudson Valley News welcomes opposing opinions.

HV News 3/17/2010