

Keeping it Local: Learned Owl's fight against Big Box Development

It started very quietly. Early in 2003 there was a meeting between two members of the Hudson Heritage Association and a developer, who was pitching a development at the south end of Hudson (2 miles from the central historic district, and my store). They mentioned Borders, Bed, Bath & Beyond, Applebee's, Old Navy. Both members of HHA thought the man was a blowhard and an idiot, told him it would never work in Hudson, and forgot about it. The developer did not. And he and his partners, both who live in Hudson, were very smart. They polished up his act, sprinkled in the phrases that people in Hudson DID want to hear (complement, not harm, existing businesses; work with the schools; tax benefits; new band uniforms, etc, etc). They also never again mentioned specific stores. In the fall of 2003 they started holding neighborhood meetings in people's homes. Suddenly, some very intelligent, long time Hudson residents were saying that they thought this might be a good idea.

Still, those of us who were concerned felt that the proposal would never make it through the City processes. Then came the word that the developers were going to put the issue on the ballot in November, taking it straight to the people, by-passing all methods of control.

Now Hudson was at this time just in the process of building a HUGE addition to their central historic downtown core. It, too, had been long and hotly debated, but was considered a key piece of Hudson's Comprehensive Plan, would bring people downtown, rather than take them away, and went through all the proper approval channels of the City. This huge project, which more than doubled the size of the current Main Street shopping district, but in small, less than 5,000 sq feet bites) was scheduled to open in October 2004.

This helped our cause, because there was strong sentiment that we should "see what the new downtown did" before adding another huge chunk of retail, particularly stores of the size planned (100,000 sq ft and up).

Luckily there was a strong and very vocal group of citizens who realized that "The Promenade", as this potential development was called, would be the death of downtown (as has happened all over the country). Although it was very much a David vs. Goliath sort of fight (the developers had tons of money, we were scrounging to find any), in Spring of 04 we started having our own neighborhood meetings. We sent begging letters to anyone we thought might be supportive, all signed by at least one member of our group. The town became polarized.

The downtown merchants joined in the nationwide "Celebrate Your Independents" promotion in July '04, in an effort to raise people's awareness of the importance of independent, locally-owned businesses. (Much good information available from AMIBA, the American Independent Business Alliance).

Because our money was really tight, SmartGrowth Hudson (as our anti-Promenade group was called) saved most of our ads until fall, just before the election. But we went to meetings of every organization in town, held meetings in neighborhoods, took every possibility to get our message out to people whose vote might be swayed.

In addition to information from AMIBA, we relied heavily on the book *Home Town Advantage: How to Defend Your Main Street Against the Chains...and Why it Matters*, and actually had the author to town to speak. Although the event was NOT well attended, her message was GREAT, and was taped and shown over and over on the local cable channel. (VERY important to make use of this resource, if you have one). There is an invaluable newsletter that comes out from Home Town Advantage, with facts and figures gathered from all over the country, as different towns fight this sort of campaign.

WE USED THEM ALL! There was a huge email campaign. We made use of ANY piece of information that showed such developments in a negative light, and emailed it all over town. Happily, many studies have shown northeast Ohio to be very over-retailed, and several business magazines and the Cleveland Plain Dealer were all eager to do stories on this proposed development and our battle to keep "Issue 25" from passing.

We felt at times that we were fighting a losing battle. The developers played heavily on the tax issue – claiming that their development would put one million dollars directly into the school coffers. Never mind that this wasn't true – many, many people believed it, and would vote yes just for this one reason.

We did not get the actual ballot language of "Issue 25" until September. Along with it, came over 13 pages of back-up language – things that would pass into law along with the building of this development, but that NO ONE WOULD SEE unless they made a point of going to City Hall and reading it. So we poured over these pages, and found terrifying things. A major "hidden defect" was the language exempting warehousing, loading, non-public areas, which changed the 50,000 sq foot maximum that the developers were publicizing to 100,000 sq foot MINIMUM with no maximum. A second hidden fact was that this was NOT just about the area at the south of town where this one development was proposed, but it was written in such a way that the same rules (and lack thereof) would apply to any piece of property that connected itself to this original piece. The uncontrolled big box development could spread two miles west and two miles north.

There were formal debates; there were informal discussions. As the vote drew close we had no idea how it was going to go. We had used every means of getting the facts out, but the presidential election was going to bring out a record crowd, and the tax issue was still a big one.

We organized a campaign of letters to the editor, with one or more appearing in every issue. We asked supporters to send in letters, and as we felt certain points needed to be emphasized, we asked people to write on certain issues. Some people willingly signed and submitted letters that our group had written.

In September, the board of the Hudson Chamber of Commerce (of which I was a member) took a stand in favor of the development. I very publicly resigned my position on the board, sending a letter to the editor of our local paper, and announcing this decision in The Learned Owl's newsletter that went out to 9,000 homes in mid-October. I also put an impassioned plea for the preservation of Main Street in my "Liz Says" column in the newsletter. Timing is everything. Although it was known that I was a founding member of SmartGrowth Hudson, I had not taken a public stand up to that point. I had not been the spokesperson for the group at any of the public events.

The outpouring of support was unbelievable. And not only for my decision to leave the Chamber's board, but against Issue 25. That vote, and my resignation, turned out to be a good thing. It made many people look again at the issue and the arguments. On November 2 2004 Issue 25 went down in flames, in a two to one vote against. Thank God. My Christmas came early. Although it was the ONLY good thing about the election.

Liz Murphy
The Learned Owl Book Shop
...on Main Street in Hudson, Ohio for 36 years