

Nashville Scene

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October 21, 2010

Area business owners greet news of Wal-Mart's imminent arrival in Berry Hill with surprising optimism

Wal-Come to the Neighborhood

by STEPHEN GEORGE

It was certainly not the best day for Pat and Mike Embree, owners of The Stitchin' Post in Berry Hill, when Wal-Mart bought the former Harding Mall on Nolensville Road and kicked them out. It was spring 2005, six months before a biting documentary called *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price* would crystallize a growing insurgency, and the mega-corporation dropped anchor with a thud, razing the old mall, whose heyday was long past. It replaced the mall with a supercenter, the biggest of the big-box stores at an average of 185,000 square feet. According to Wal-Mart's corporate website, there are 2,843 of them; that comes to nearly 526 million square feet of supercenter in America.

Recalling the ordeal, Pat Embree still is ticked. The Embrees were given 55 days to move from the place where they'd set up shop 30 years before. They moved their niche business — all manner of supplies for knitting and cross-stitching — into a single-story ranch-style house in Berry Hill, which at 0.9 square miles and a population of 806 is the smallest of Nashville's satellite cities. Pat is now the president of the Berry Hill Merchants Association.



And Wal-Mart is back, albeit not exactly as the same corporate menace it was five years ago. On Oct. 11, the company's real estate division purchased the 9.4-acre former Expo Design Center, just across Powell Avenue from 100 Oaks Mall. Its plans are for a scaled-down supercenter that would fill the site's existing 95,000-square-foot building. The move is part of a new national downsizing strategy that became public last week, just two months after the chain quietly raised prices on some of its core goods as it tries to counter recent lag.

The site, which the company bought for \$12.4 million, is also right across Thompson Lane from Berry Hill's main drag, Bransford Avenue. Along that street is a collection of local retail oddities, from the Curious Heart Emporium and the Cat Shoppe to the Beaded Bungalow and Lindsey's Doll Cottage, that help to define the working-class neighborhood as an outlier among even Nashville's most eccentric burbs.

There are more than 400 businesses in the satellite city — also known as Music Row South for its collection of recording studios. About one-fourth of the market is retail. And earlier this year, Berry Hill issued a 20-year plan that places new controls on zoning so that in a couple decades, the place might look more Hillsboro than Edgehill.

In fact, among Nashville neighborhoods, Berry Hill is perhaps the most appropriate to test a new emerging theory of the Wal-Mart Effect: Put a scaled-down supercenter a few hundred yards away from a known but overlooked shopping district, and it won't necessarily annihilate the locals the way Wal-Marts have across rural America. It might make them stronger.

"I'm all for it," Embree says. "Really, honestly, they are not a competition for me. Any time you've got big traffic coming in, I think that's a real plus."

Every one of the handful of Berry Hill business owners who spoke with the *Scene* offered a similar assessment.

"All of those little businesses have come to grips long ago with the fact that we are not the volume place — we fought that battle within ourselves, and we don't really need to worry about that now," says Gep Nelson, co-owner of the Yellow Porch Restaurant on Thompson Lane. "All those businesses have the

things that Wal-Mart doesn't have, and Wal-Mart probably has the things they don't have."

Indeed, that is the way — the only way — smaller local economies can exist within the Wal-Mart sphere of influence. As failing chains such as Kmart and Winn-Dixie have proved, almost no one competes with Wal-Mart on prices alone; the retail giant's groceries tend to be about 15 percent cheaper than other grocers', for instance. So stores differentiate themselves by providing more knowledgeable service, classier style and personality, says Malcolm Getz, associate professor of economics at Vanderbilt.

"Many of the stores in the Berry Hill area seem to be of the boutique variety and may benefit from the traffic flow," he says. "Restaurants and specialty shops should do well or at least not be harmed. They may adjust their merchandise mix, become more careful about pricing and service. Stores with a neighborhood orientation can succeed."

Most of Berry Hill is a tangle of windy roads with 1,000-square-foot setback houses built on equally small lots. In the 1970s, the city tweaked its zoning laws to allow for retailers and offices, which led to a boom in the '80s and '90s, according to city manager Joe C. Baker. The city looks basically the same today: a whole bunch of small houses with yard signs advertising various services, from holistic healing to hair care. The Rosedale Avenue area, in the city's northeast corner, is where most residences are; only about 50 of Berry Hill's single-family homes are outside that area.

There is also, of course, the matter of Berry Hill's industrial history, not to mention its proximity to the racetrack and the impending fate of the fairgrounds.

"It's always been an eclectic mix, and we didn't have the issue of residents not being comfortable being near commercial businesses, because it's been that way for a long time," Baker says. "Things are moving toward having mixed use. Well, we've already been there, so there's not really a hump to get over."

The hump, as it were, may turn out to be this cold fact: While Wal-Mart has been proven time and again to increase vehicle traffic, it doesn't always bring the high volume — or kind — of clientele that might spend the rest of their day

roaming around Berry Hill spending money. Wal-Mart's strategy, though amended with the change in the size of the supercenters, remains basically the same for cities as in rural areas: saturation. Considering there is a full-size supercenter within three miles of 100 Oaks, it's not likely that people will flock to the new store, nor are they likely to leave the one-stop shop and go anywhere but the parking lot.

"People who come to visit a Wal-Mart store are not necessarily leaving that store and shopping in the neighborhood," says Stacy Mitchell, author of *Big-Box Swindle*, an indictment of the megastore phenomenon. "Some of that has to do with the pattern of land-use and the fact that typically there's a big parking lot in between you [and the neighborhood], and even though it might be very close, it's not really well-connected."

Still, Pat Embree and others can hope. After all, Vanderbilt's satellite medical center at 100 Oaks has given the neighborhood a jolt most didn't expect.

"I'm not surprised [about Wal-Mart coming to 100 Oaks]," says Embree, "since they put two Wal-Mart's on Nolensville Road two miles apart."

Actually, it's 2.3 miles — but who's quibbling?

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