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Film crew chronicles opposition to Costco gas station

by Amber Parcher | Staff Writer

In a dimly lit room, members of the Wheaton Redevelopment Advisory Committee shuffle through endless pages of arcane zoning law and redevelopment plans in front of a roomful of residents and two movie cameras.

Although the scene would put the average person to sleep, it's vital to Wheaton's future.

Father and son filmmakers John and Matt Echave have lugged their cameras to many such meetings over the past few months, capturing on film the passionate efforts of the Kensington Heights Civic Association to fight a plan to fast-track bringing a 16-pump Costco gas station into their neighborhood.

The filmmakers have been to a few advisory-board meetings, a dozen civic-association workgroups and eventually they will follow the residents to Rockville for the County Council's decision on the issue, which is slated for early summer. If there's any litigation following the Council's decision, they'll chronicle that, too.

It's not the sexiest of topics, but it's one John Echave says is crucial to document on film.

"I'm here to see democracy in action, where everyone has a voice, no matter what color or ethnic background they have," he said. "It's people who care and have a vested interest."

At the most recent WRAC meeting, the filmmakers set a camera up on both sides of the conference room at the Mid-County Regional Services Center in Wheaton. Kensington resident Danila Sheveiko shifted in his chair during the discussion, keeping a notepad in his lap and an ear cocked toward the WRAC members. He and several of his neighbors are anything but asleep as they wait for the committee to address one of the last items on its agenda: the controversial zoning-text amendment that would place the gas station fewer than 150 feet from their neighborhood.

When committee chairman Greg Baker finally introduces item seven — the gas station amendment — the cameramen perk up and zoom in on Baker.

"I don't want to address the [zoning-text amendment] at this point, because we don't have enough information," Baker tells the group of about 20 WRAC members and the residents who came to hear them.

The cameras veer toward Sheveiko and his neighbors, who, previously quiet, now grumble in disapproval at the decision. They had planned to explain to WRAC why the

committee, made up of area residents and business owners who advise the county government on local issues, should oppose the amendment.

"That means the next time they'll discuss it is a day before the [County Council] public hearing [on the amendment]," whispers Kensington resident Karen Cordry, herself a former WRAC chair.

John Echave said he's not interested in taking sides — the former Associated Press and National Geographic reporter has had years of training in objectivity. He's not even focused on the outcome of the dispute.

What the Echaves say they're trying to capture is the grassroots nature that characterizes Kensington's opposition to the amendment. They also want to see whether any of that can still have an impact on legislators' decisions.

"It's at the core of our American process, that people at the very small grassroots level decide to vent or give their opinions and join together to try to make some changes," John Echave said. "... We can see people get together in their homes and plan a strategy. That's what it's all about in this country, really. In other countries you can't do that. They'll put you in jail."

Sheveiko, who is a longtime friend of John Echave's, said he thinks the cameras will have a more immediate effect on his civic association's cause. The phrase "NIMBY" has been tossed around a lot recently, but it's "a smear" against the civic association, Sheveiko says, referring to the "Not-in-my-backyard" term used to label residents hesitant to change.

The civic association is anything but NIMBY, Sheveiko explained.

"I'm hoping the cameras capture that," he said last week as he settled in to watch the WRAC meeting. Sheveiko said his civic association is trying to find the most equitable solution for all parties involved: the county government, the WRAC committee and most of the Kensington Heights neighborhood all want Costco to come to Wheaton. And Kensington Heights even supports County Executive Isiah Leggett's \$4 million subsidy to Westfield Wheaton Shopping Center to help the downtown Wheaton mall cover construction costs for the \$60-million, 232,000-square-foot warehouse store, which will include the infamous gas station.

But things took a bad turn in March, when Leggett (D) proposed a zoning-text amendment that would allow gas stations in all regional malls, bypassing the traditional special-exception process already in place to review gas stations proposals individually. The current process can take up to a year, and Leggett's amendment could be approved in as little as a month.

To avoid what they see as a legislative misstep that could cost the neighborhood clean air, clean water and peace of mind, Kensington Heights residents have had to act fast.

Which is what brought them and the film crew to last week's WRAC meeting.

"I wish we had it mic'd up," Matt Echave tells his father before the meeting last week as the two divide the room into coverage areas for each camera.

Behind him, Sheveiko is explaining that protesting the amendment with a well-organized army of civic association members is statistically more effective than suing. They know this because they researched it, he said.

"Any legal action only prolongs the inevitable," Sheveiko said. "Instead of delaying it for years and years, we're going constructive."

John Echave said he's impressed with a system that allows for that kind of activism "without risking your job or jail," he said.

"And hopefully it works," John Echave said. "But whether this group will win in the end, I don't know."