

Dozens flock to testify on Costco gas station bill

By Victor Zapana, *The Washington Post*. Published June 19, 2012.

Dozens of community activists and business leaders flocked to a Montgomery County Council meeting Tuesday to testify on a controversial bill that would block plans for a gas station at the Costco under construction next to the Westfield Mall in Wheaton.

In April, Montgomery County Council member Marc Elrich (D-At Large) proposed the bill after hearing concerns from residents near the site.

Civic activists say the super-sized gas station--which would fuel up to 16 vehicles at a time--is a public health risk because it is too close to residential neighborhoods and a swimming pool.

They are urging the council to impose stronger restrictions on development, while the business community has come together to oppose the regulations. Legislators will start debating the bill at a committee meeting July 9.

"I like Costco gas stations," said Larry Silverman, an environmental lawyer. "I'd like them in the county. Just not here."

Costco and its local lobbyist, Pat Harris, say there is no site-specific evidence about the station's potential impact on community health. They have submitted studies to suggest the impact would be minimal.

But civic activists, such as Judy Higgins and Jim Humphrey, say the bill should be approved as a "precaution." One resident, Gail Dalferes, said it would be a "dereliction of duty" not to approve the bill.

"It's prudent to err on the side of caution with this legislation," Higgins said. "It's time for our legislators to decide the proper parameters for these mega gas stations."

Business leaders, on the other hand, believe the legislation is overly burdensome. Costco already is undergoing a rigorous application process with the county to gain approval for construction of the gas station. Public hearings affiliated with the application process may begin in October.

"We are troubled by the council's apparent willingness to consider changing the applicable rules ... at such a late hour," said Mark Rittenberg, a member of the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Chamber of Commerce. He said the bill, if approved, would send the message that the county is "unreliable" and "not a trusted partner."

Meanwhile, Costco has asked its store members for help, and it says it now has more than 5,000 letters from county residents who oppose the bill. Harris has met with several council members to persuade them to abandon their support.

Earlier this month, the Montgomery County planning board met to decide whether to recommend the legislation to the County Council. Planning staff members had advised the board not to recommend the legislation, but the body ended up unable to make a decision.

Nonetheless, a majority of board members agreed at the meeting that the Costco gas station should not be affected by the bill.