

Wal-Mart reversal in DeLand stuns foes

Some said they saw signs Commissioner Mary Swiderski would eventually switch sides.

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DELAND — A day after a Wal-Mart Supercenter got its final approval in north DeLand, those who fought against it for years said they feel betrayed by someone they'd considered a friend.

For four years, City Commissioner Mary Swiderski stood staunchly against a Wal-Mart Supercenter in north DeLand. Wal-Mart opponents who admired her views while she was on the planning board helped get her elected to the City Commission in 1999.

But late Monday night, Swiderski renounced her previous decisions, saying that for four years she had been motivated by anger and retaliation. She broke a deadlock and voted to approve the supercenter on Woodland Avenue north of U.S. Highway 92, a decision that has left her old friends struggling for answers.

In the days before the vote, they said, she wouldn't even take their calls as she negotiated with Wal-Mart on ways to make the supercenter look pretty.

"It's just incredible that for four years running that she voted with us and then betrayed us like that," said Tom Brooks, a Wal-Mart opponent.

Monday's vote left opponents of Wal-Mart reeling and unsure of their next step. An appeal is pending in court, and the group could file a separate complaint with the City Commission in the next 30 days.

Mayor Dave Riggsby, who has consistently voted in favor of the supercenter, said Swiderski



SWIDERSKI

Swiderski says attacks of Sept. 11 inspired her compromise vote

WAL-MART FROM D1

at least wanted some things that she felt her constituency was asking for. So she was trying in her way to be a peacemaker."

After her vote, Swiderski gave a speech in which she said the conflict was "all my fault" and that she had been "consumed with anger and retaliation against those that were changing my DeLand."

She blamed herself for being too anti-Wal-Mart instead of trying to reach a compromise. She even invoked this month's terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington D.C. as playing a part in her decision.

"Once you stop hating, things change," she said. "After what has happened in New York on Sept. 11, I believe we all need to start living a life that matters."

Later, she said, "It took Sept. 11 to put that into perspective. It was that that made me wake up and say, 'Let's move on.'"

Remarks confused some

Some said they found her remarks about the terrorist attacks baffling. Others said that perhaps in some way, the attacks that shocked the nation made her more reflective about the anger and divisiveness the Wal-Mart issue has created in DeLand.

Wal-Mart opponent Glenn Brewer said what struck him more than comments about the terrorist attacks was that Swiderski used the term "living a life that matters" three weeks after he gave her a book with the same name.

Brewer, who lives on Violetwood Road across from where the supercenter would go, said he gave the book about resolving inner conflicts to Swiderski when it became apparent she was starting to have doubts about her anti-Wal-Mart stance.

worried more about traffic and the vacant space that would be left by the regular-size Wal-Mart nearby.

But former allies think that Swiderski, who has worked as a graphic artist and does artwork on her own, must have been flattered by Wal-Mart's interest in her ideas.

"Of course they were courting her vote," Brewer said. "The best way to court someone in any manner, I suppose, is to compliment them. Mary is a very creative person. She has good talents. She has good taste. For them to accept her ideas was a huge compliment."

Wal-Mart called residents

As Wal-Mart was negotiating with Swiderski, the discount giant was waging an intense public relations campaign including phone calls to residents and letters urging them to contact Swiderski and city commissioner Marsnall Bone if they were in favor of the supercenter.

"I knew everyone on the commission had been under an extreme amount of pressure," said Allen Watts, an attorney for the anti-Wal-Mart residents.

Many people were urging the commission to hold off on voting until after next month's elections, when the makeup of the commission could change dramatically.

The commission is missing one member right now — Bob Appar, who resigned to run for mayor. But Riggsby, who has consistently voted in favor of Wal-Mart, insisted on having the commission vote before the elections.

A Swiderski recall?

There was talk Tuesday of a recall petition against Swiderski, although Wal-Mart foe and City Commission candidate Maureen France says that's going too far.