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Wal-Mart officials prepare for Christiansburg Sam's Club

Officials said they will file plans soon for the New River Valley's first warehouse-type store.

By Jeff Sturgeon | The Roanoke Times

Wal-Mart Stores Inc. will seek permission to open a Sam's Club at the underused Christiansburg Marketplace shopping center, company spokeswoman E.R. Anderson said.

Paperwork will be filed "in a month or so," according to Anderson.

If the project comes to fruition, it would create the first Sam's Club in the New River Valley.

Sam's Club is popular for selling food in bulk packages to clientele who pay \$35 for an annual membership (\$40 for a family) to shop in a warehouse-type store with a pharmacy, tire and battery shop, floral department and cafe.

The chain generated \$11.9 billion in second-quarter revenue for Arkansas-based Wal-Mart, which operates Sam's Clubs in Roanoke, Lynchburg and Beckley, W.Va.

Town Manager Lance Terpenney said project representatives have spoken informally with the town's planning and zoning office about using the store to reinvigorate the 18-year-old Marketplace center, which is laden with vacant storefronts even as nearby shopping centers are full.

Although many details require attention, including the issuance of building permits and signing of a lease, Marketplace merchants and shoppers are delighted by the prospect for the store.

"I'd go. I like Sam's," said Sunni Dunford, a Pulaski woman who ate lunch and shopped Thursday at Marketplace.

Her friend and dining partner, Kelly Moran of Newport, said she goes to the Roanoke Sam's Club for such items as dog food, laundry soap and books.

"It'd be nice to have one convenient," Moran said.

The center has been operating for years without an anchor tenant or a prime retailer capable of drawing shoppers to its doors and the doors of smaller merchants.

A Sam's Club could fit the bill.

Its more than 600 locations average 133,000 square feet, or nearly half the size of the Marketplace, which the Virginia Economic Development Partnership said measures 300,000 square feet.

Sam's Club is "what we need," said Nancy Trump, who has owned the Hair Force salon at Marketplace for 11 years.

"It will certainly mean a lot more foot traffic for us. And an anchor has to make it more attractive for others."

Trump said she was told by a shopping center representative that the planned Sam's Club will sell gasoline and be located on the center's north end.

Terpenny said the discussions at town level focused at least in part on "what would be involved in a partial demolition of the original Walmart store," which operated at the northern end of the Marketplace from after its opening in 1991 until 1996.

Wal-Mart closed that location as it opened its North Franklin Road Supercenter, which remains in business.

Four years later, the shopping center lost Goody's to Spradlin Farm. Ginger's Jewelry and Rack Room Shoes left.

Big Lots, Tractor Supply Co. and Books-A-Million then joined the Marketplace, but Books-A-Million and Tractor Supply have left. The vast majority of the estimated 1,200 parking spaces at the Marketplace are vacant daily.

Spanning nearly 29 acres, the shopping center belongs to Christiansburg Marketplace LLC, a Maryland limited liability company, and lies at North Franklin Street and Peppers Ferry Road.

A partner in the ownership group, Michael Bisciotti, was asked about reports that Sam's Club is coming.

"We have no signed lease," he said.

However, there appear to be a number of rationales for Wal-Mart to deepen its investment in the New River Valley market at this time. The region has no warehouse-type big-box retailer yet. The warehouse retail segment has prospered even during the recession.

Although the New River Valley is not a top retail market, it has a population of nearly 169,000 people, including 45,000 college students, and the median household income is nearly \$40,000.

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