



Becoming a shopper's paradise

Wednesday, Sep 20, 2006 - 12:18 AM

=

The greater Bristol area is poised to become a regional shopping destination on a par with Johnson City.

That is the net effect of Monday's announcement that some of the giants of retail are moving to the Exit 7 area off Interstate 81. The list of tenants includes Old Navy, PetSmart, Books-A-Million, Best Buy and a "major discounter" to be named in a few weeks.

That developers and government officials are being coy about the identity of the "major discounter" does not diminish the impact of the announcement. This development is extraordinary good news for the region.

Construction of the multi-million development will infuse money into the local economy. Over the longer term, the shopping plaza will boost the sales tax coffers and property tax rolls in Washington County, since it is located just outside the city boundary. It is also expected to spark further growth.

No doubt, the county made concessions to the developers to win this prize. Not everyone agrees on the use of government incentives to foster retail development. Critics argue that retail jobs rarely provide salaries suitable to support a family; they prefer government incentives go to recruit manufacturers.

But in a changing economy, new factories are scarce. When it is finished, this development will employ 800 to 1,000 workers – ranging from managers to sales clerks. Odds are there will be plenty of applicants. And even the low-end jobs fill a need – providing supplemental income for retirees or spending cash for college students.

Opponents of continued retail growth also argue the marketplace is already saturated and that new development will merely shift sales from existing businesses, rather than creating a new revenue stream. In general terms, this is correct ... to a point.

However, this development features niche shops that already exist in Johnson City. These stores lure area residents to Johnson City to spend their hard-earned cash. The sales tax from those purchases bolsters the bottom line in Johnson City, not Bristol. The Highlands is a chance for the greater Bristol area to recapture some of that lost revenue and funnel it into local schools and government services.

Taking a broader view, the new development won't just give Bristol residents a reason to keep their cash at home rather than driving 30 miles to Johnson City. It will draw shoppers from a wide swath of Southwest Virginia. National retailers were slow to grasp this fact – arguing for years that Bristol didn't have enough "households" to support a retail development of this caliber. They were wrong.

It's not unrealistic to expect residents from Norton, Lebanon, Grundy and Marion to drive to Bristol for these shops and to dine while they are here. If it doesn't already have one, Washington County should consider levying a small meals tax to further capitalize on this trade. Bristol Virginia and several towns in the county already do so – allowing visitors to help fund local government.

The development is such an economic blessing that it seems a bit imprudent to raise questions. However, there are issues that remain to be resolved. The development will add to traffic congestion on Lee Highway. And while the county contends its sewage treatment agreement with Bristol Virginia provides enough capacity to handle the demands of the development, the city might not share such an interpretation. But these are obstacles that can be surmounted.

A development of this magnitude is welcome news for the region in terms of jobs, economic impact and

convenience for time-pressed shoppers.

.

[Go Back](#)