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Remington Walmart plan wins final City Council OK

Construction to begin in spring on 11-acre project; project also includes Lowe's

By Julie Scharper, The Baltimore Sun

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Plans for an 11-acre development in Remington — including apartments, shops and a Walmart store — won final approval from the Baltimore City Council on Monday, after stiff opposition from some groups and months of wrangling over traffic and environmental concerns.

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Tensions over the project — which divided neighborhood groups and pitted labor activists against city officials — rose in recent weeks, as robocalls and e-mail chains denounced the sponsor of the zoning bill for the project, Councilwoman Belinda Conaway.

"Contrary to wild accusations from opponents of this project, there was no conspiracy on the part of district representatives or the rest of the council," said Conaway, who represents the area. She read excerpts from letters written in support of the project.

Details of 25th Street Station, which will be built on the site of Anderson Automotive, first emerged nearly a year ago. The process of rezoning the land for the shopping center has been protracted and marked by contention, with council committee hearings stretching late into the night.

The project will also include a Lowe's home improvement store. The project is eligible for substantial tax breaks because it is located in one of the city's two "focus areas." The council hastily approved the designation for a swath of West Baltimore, including Remington, at the request of the quasi-public Baltimore Development Corp. last year, shortly before development plans for the site were announced.

Some council members, lead by Councilwoman Mary Pat Clarke, had hoped to force Walmart to pay workers higher wages, but City Solicitor George Nilson decreed that the zoning measure could only govern land use, not working conditions.

Clarke introduced a separate bill that would require all major retailers to pay workers the city's living wage, but it was defeated by a narrow committee vote. Clarke, whose district abuts the project, hopes to resurrect the measure.

At a rally before the meeting, members of Baltimore CAN, an organization spearheaded by the advocacy group Progressive Maryland, masqueraded as descendants of Sam Walton, founder of the retail behemoth. Wearing play money pinned to their clothes, they mockingly thanked Baltimore officials for making it easy to

open a new store.

Rion Dennis, executive director of Progressive Maryland, said he was hopeful that the council would approve Clarke's living wage measure and a second bill, sponsored by Councilman Bill Henry, which would increase the number of union workers hired for construction jobs throughout the city.

A small group of counterprotesters, who said they lived in Remington, waved signs saying they welcomed the jobs and convenient shopping.

"When we have to go shopping, our daughters pick us up and drive us to the county," said Eloise Thompson of Remington, who said she hoped to be hired as a greeter at Walmart.

Carl Stokes was the sole council member to abstain from voting on the project; the other 14 members voted in favor of it. He said he wanted more assurances that local workers would be hired to build and staff the store and that he also had concerns about traffic plans.

"I wanted to leave a message that there was more work to be done," said Stokes.

Members of the Remington Neighborhood Association had expressed concerns about traffic and asked the council Monday to strike some of the traffic plans from the bill. A rival neighborhood group, the Greater Remington Improvement Association, formed a coalition with the Old Goucher Community Association and Charles Village Civic Association to work closely with developers on traffic issues.

Jon Laria, an attorney for developer Rick Walker of WV Urban Development, said that construction could begin once the city's planning commission grants final design approval for the project next month. Construction is expected to begin in the spring and last up to a year and a half.

Monday's meeting was also the last council session for Councilwoman Agnes Welch, who recently celebrated her 86th birthday and is retiring in the midst of her seventh term. The council will likely choose a successor to Welch next month.

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