

The Salem Leader
Educationally Speaking
8/20/07
Justin Harter

Always Low. Always Wal-Mart.

Growing up in Salem I remember when Wal-Mart arrived in Scottsburg. My dad and I ventured to that Wal-Mart every Friday night to pickup weekly groceries and supplies almost religiously. I, like so many residents of Salem, wanted a Wal-Mart in Salem to reduce our 20-minute commute for a \$1.99 pair of socks. Salem never received the blessing of a Wal-Mart and to this day residents of Washington County bemoan the city and county councils for not acting in the best interests of their residents to bring a Wal-Mart to town. When I moved out of Salem to Indianapolis I stopped shopping at Wal-Mart because I realized we're all better off without one.

First, let's start with the general consensus. Generally, consumers want: low-priced goods, convenience and lots of material things. Wal-Mart brings all those to the table. Those same consumers, as part of society, also want: jobs, employee benefits and livable wages. Wal-Mart claims to bring all those to the table, too. Cities and towns want to offer more jobs and provide quality services and amenities like parks and schools to their residents, which it does through tax revenue. Wal-Mart brings those promises of jobs and thousands of dollars in tax revenue when it makes a pitch for new construction, too. So why does Wal-Mart even have to ask to build a store? Because there's a reason that pair of socks is so cheap.

For purposes of this argument, we'll pretend Wal-Mart's cleared ground on Highway 135 South just south of Hilltop Plaza in Salem. They're ready to begin construction and they start by plowing their way over fertile soil capable of producing thousands of dollars in corn and soybeans. But we don't care because we want cheap socks. Wal-Mart then finishes construction and because the massive amount of water and sewage produced by the store the City of Salem's Public Works Department struggles to meet demand. As a result, water pressure in your home is decreased and you can't take a decent shower anymore. But that's okay because you're on your way to Wal-Mart for that cheap pair of socks.

You get to the Wal-Mart and you find traffic congestion in and around the store. Remember how much you hated it when CVS built on the corner of Main and Hackberry because it was so hard to pull out of the parking lot? But this is okay, because it's Wal-Mart and you need new socks. You get inside and notice Larry Purlee from LaGene's Jewelers standing as a greeter. Larry lost his job when Wal-Mart's new jewelry counter opened. His old storefront now sits vacant on the square. But it's okay because Larry should be able to live on his new average salary of \$9.37 an hour, that's *only a little* below poverty level. They provide him with a sort of healthcare plan, too. Of course, it only covers a handful of drugs and they'll fire him if he becomes too ill. No big deal though. You still need socks.

Next, you find the socks you've needed for so long. Lucky for you they're marked down by 50 cents because the Chinese are experiencing an "economic boom" and they can get away with paying their employees less, which means cheaper production costs and cheaper socks for you! Hooray!

Now that you've got your socks you decide you need some groceries. It's a good thing they're right there, all fresh and succulent – assuming you look past their bruised apples and mushy tomatoes. You'll just get boxed dinners instead, the ones for people on a diet. They're only a \$1 each. You'll just have to look past the triple-digit amounts of sodium in the food that'll raise your blood pressure and your chances for a stroke. And you'll have to look past the old farmer standing next to you that lost his land, home and livelihood to Wal-Mart's parking lot. It's a shame he's been a farmer all of his life and never needed to go to a college, because now he has no other marketable skills and draws unemployment. Lastly, you go check out of the store and after you've tried conversing with the Hispanic immigrant at the checkout that you can't understand, you go home with your 50-cent savings.

You get home to your mailbox to find your tax bill sitting in the mail. You figure it'll be lower since Wal-Mart can pay for most of the town's needs. Except, your bill is higher because Wal-Mart pays taxes to a sort of real estate firm (called a REIT) that Wal-Mart itself owns. So Wal-Mart pays itself it's own taxes. But even better, with the influx of jobs it supposedly created, no one imagined that for every three jobs they created, two higher-paying jobs were lost elsewhere in town. Now, with rising unemployment rates and a decreased tax base, the city has to charge you even more for your property just to keep the school doors open and plow the streets after it snows. But it's okay. You have new socks and an extra 50 cents in your pocket you can use to foot the bill.