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## Wal-Mart can't get store in city's door

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BY [FRAN SPIELMAN](#) City Hall Reporter

Wal-Mart's \$20 million entry into the Chicago market suffered a serious -- and perhaps fatal -- setback Thursday, when organized labor flexed its muscle against a company it calls "public enemy No. 1" and derailed a West Side zoning change.

In siding with the Chicago Federation of Labor over Wal-Mart and Ald. Emma Mitts (37th), the Zoning Committee broke with the longstanding City Council tradition of deferring to the local alderman on zoning issues.

Aldermen said they violated their own unwritten rule for the proposed, 150,000-square-foot store on the northern edge of impoverished Austin because the Wal-Mart issue is bigger than just one neighborhood.

They argued that Chicago is a "union town" that should slam the door to a "notoriously anti-union" retailing behemoth that pays its employees \$2 an hour less than its competitors, offers meager benefits, runs roughshod over women and illegal immigrants, and showers its political contributions on Republican candidates.

The first Chicago Wal-Mart was supposed to open in spring 2005 at 1657 N. Kilpatrick, on the site of a vacant shampoo factory. It was expected to be the first of several Wal-Mart stores in Chicago, according to company officials who have scouted a dozen city sites.

"They're taking over our country. They're ruining suppliers. They're burying competition. They're paying their employees dirt. And they're putting on a smiley face when they do it. Somebody's got to stand up to 'em," said Transportation Committee Chairman Tom Allen (38th).

In a City Council with only one Republican, Wal-Mart's decision to shower 85 percent of its \$1.5 million-a-year political action committee fund on GOP candidates doesn't sit well, said Finance Committee Chairman Edward M. Burke (14th). "This is a Democratic city, and it's a union city," he said.

Mitts countered that her impoverished West Side ward is desperate for jobs -- even low-paying ones. "We've got teenagers who need work. They've got to start somewhere. I started out in a grocery store. What's wrong with them starting and being trained? Minimum wage is low wages [but] it's a job," she said.

Mitts accused her colleagues of deferring the zoning change without her consent when she was out of the City Council chambers making a phone call. Zoning Committee Chairman William Banks (36th) insisted that Mitts "didn't have the votes" and that the deferral spared her the embarrassment of a certain defeat.

John Bisio, Wal-Mart's regional manager for community affairs, blamed "special interests trying to keep out competition" for Thursday's setback. The deferral "just gives us the opportunity to better tell our story," Bisio said.

"Target is not union. K-Mart is not union. A lot of small mom and pop stores are not union. We are not an anti-union company. . . . We do pay a very competitive wage and benefits package," he said.

CFL President Dennis Gannon refused to claim victory. Wal-Mart, he said, is too big to "fold its tent" and go home.

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