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## Racial fears seen as part of Best Buy opposition

### Fox Point residents say store would draw traffic from outside suburb

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**Fox Point** - What seemed like a routine matter when a Best Buy store was proposed for RiverPoint Village Shopping Center has ignited a debate over what type of retailers - and shoppers - should be welcome in this affluent North Shore suburb.

The Minneapolis-based electronics retailer wants to open its fifth Milwaukee-area store at RiverPoint, a shopping center off I-43 at W. Brown Deer Road. The store would fill a space left vacant when a Kohl's supermarket closed a year ago, creating a hole at the popular shopping center.

With the space already zoned for retail, the Fox Point Plan Commission unanimously recommended approval after a little more than an hour of debating mundane details.

Then the welcome mat was yanked away by some Fox Point residents who petitioned against Best Buy's plans.

### Racial unease

Most of those unhappy about the store said it would draw too much traffic.

Some raised concerns about the people the store might attract, and potential crime. With a new store, opponents say, Best Buy may close its location near the former Northridge Mall on Milwaukee's northwest side, bringing those customers to RiverPoint.

Fox Point is 99% white, according to census data, while Milwaukee's northwest side has a substantial black population.

"I believe that they've made it very clear they don't want people coming to Fox Point from other parts of town," said Ned Brickman, whose partnership owns RiverPoint. "They are worried about Northridge and Best Buy's clientele at Northridge."

Asked whether she believed some residents are motivated by racial fears, Village Board member Louise Petering replied, "That probably is the case. I can't say for 100 percent sure. Their comments were somewhat veiled, I think."

Opponents deny they're driven by racial issues. But some observers say the strong reaction suggests race might play a role.

## **Segregated city**

The Milwaukee area, like other metro areas, is segregated, said Kirk Harris, an instructor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Department of Urban Planning.

People living in a largely white area might react emotionally when they believe a store will bring a substantial number of minorities to their community, he said.

"Controlling land use is a powerful vehicle as to how a community looks," said Harris, who teaches a course on the role of race and class in urban development.

The dispute in Fox Point, where the Village Board will meet Tuesday to consider Best Buy's request, isn't unusual, he said.

Race has been an undercurrent in other developments, including the proposed PabstCity conversion of the former Pabst brewery into a downtown retail and entertainment complex. Executives at both Milwaukee-based Marcus Theatres Corp. and Kansas City, Mo.-based AMC Entertainment Inc. recently decided against putting a cinema in PabstCity in part because of its location near the central city, project developers said.

In 1996, then-Brookfield Mayor Kathryn Bloomberg drew fire after she criticized T.J. Maxx and Burlington Coat Factory, two stores at N. 124th St. and W. Capitol Drive at the city's border, saying customers weren't representative of Brookfield.

A year later, anonymous fliers distributed in Mequon opposed commercial development near N. Wauwatosa and W. Mequon roads, saying it would attract "the criminals that now infest the area around Northridge."

## 'Quiet racism'

In most cases, people don't acknowledge that race plays a role, Harris said. "Nobody wants to be accused of racism," he said.

It's part of what Henry Louis Taylor Jr. calls "quiet racism."

"It's difficult to see, it's difficult to pinpoint because it's so tied up in institutional arrangements and how communities are structured," said Taylor, director of the Center for Urban Studies at State University of New York-Buffalo.

It also surfaces when suburbs use minimum lot-size regulations to bar affordable homes that might appeal to lower-income families, including minorities, said Welford Sanders, executive director of the Martin Luther King Economic Development Corp. and a UWM urban planning instructor.

Opposition to so-called big box stores, which are typically defined as those with at least 100,000 square feet, is usually based on concerns about traffic and store appearance. The proposed Best Buy would fill 42,000 square feet.

Sanders is skeptical about the Best Buy traffic argument, given that it would operate within an existing shopping center.

Several residents said the store's regional draw would bring more cars to RiverPoint than the Kohl's, which drew shoppers from a smaller area.

RiverPoint owner Brickman said Best Buy wouldn't generate any more traffic than the Kohl's. People drive to supermarkets more frequently than they drive to a retailer such as Best Buy, he said. Brickman also said one of RiverPoint's largest tenants is a Borders Books, which has a regional draw and hasn't caused traffic problems.

Best Buy would attract "too many people" to RiverPoint, Fox Point resident Robb Marcus said in an interview. "I don't care what type of people frequent there."

Others, however, did raise concerns about what type of people Best Buy could attract to RiverPoint.

## Fear of crime

Fox Point resident Linda Settler said Best Buy would attract customers who would bring crime, making RiverPoint an unsafe hangout for her children, ages 12 and 16.

"These people have no stake in my community," Settler said in an interview.

When asked whether she was referring to blacks, Settler said, it's "people from other communities who don't have the same socioeconomic status as we do."

If Best Buy closes the Northridge-area store, there will be "an element" at RiverPoint that people won't like, Fox Point resident Bob Cory said.

"Those people are going to come in here to take a look at Best Buy," Cory said during the July 13 board meeting. "Then they're going to shoplift someplace else."

Cory, whose remarks drew scattered applause, declined to elaborate when contacted.

Best Buy would "bring in people from way outside that don't live in our community and, to be honest, don't really care about our community," resident Steven Hellman said during the same meeting.

Hellman, in a later interview, said his remarks were based mainly on the level of crime reported at Best Buy stores in the Milwaukee area.

According to data compiled by Fox Point police, the Best Buy store in the Northridge area reported an average of 25 thefts annually from January 2003 through June 2004. During that same period, the average annual theft count at other Best Buy stores in the area were Greenfield, 34; Wauwatosa, 15; and Brookfield, six.

The Kohl's supermarket at RiverPoint reported an average of 11 thefts a year during a five-year period, according to police records provided to Village Manager Susan Robertson.

A Best Buy spokesman declined to comment. Brickman said he thinks opponents are reacting out of racial fears.

"No one's going to come out and say that," said Brickman, who lives in Fox Point. "But, by their actions, they kind of do."

In attempting to keep out Best Buy, opponents "are taking the Village Board down a very questionable legal and moral path," he said.

"You can't pick and choose what people you allow into your village," Brickman said.

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