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Costco club holders pumping gas outside of store in West Homestead in Pennsylvania. Photo courtesy of AP.

A public hearing was held on Wednesday in Hempstead's Town Hall to discuss Costco Wholesale Club's plan to add a 22-pump gas station on Rockaway Turnpike in Lawrence. Concerned residents oppose the proposal because they feel as though the station would generate more traffic and potentially dangerous situations on the already busy road. Several business owners were also in attendance, expressing their concerns for the increased competition. If the proposal passes, Lawrence's Costco will be the first with a gas station on Long Island.

Costco is seeking a permit to install three 30,000-gallon storage tanks in the southwest corner of Rockaway Turnpike and the Nassau Expressway. Its plan is to take 163 of its 822 parking spaces to create the station. There could be 915 spaces if the club opts to build additional spots on undeveloped land which is currently owned by New York State.

The town is requiring at least 775 parking spaces based on the proposal. If Costco stripped out the entire parcel now, as it stands today, it would have over 900 spaces and would not require a variance. Costco's plan shows a second contingency that relates to the Nassau Expressway. In the most conservative plan, it would widen the road and take a portion of those spaces and that would leave Costco with 735 spaces.

Before Costco may proceed to build the gas station, Hempstead's Board of Appeals must grant Costco a parking variance. The town board meeting, which has already been closed, was held to request that the property be included in the Gasoline Service Station (GSS) overlay district. Anytime there is a new gas station in the Town of Hempstead it has to be included in that zoning overlay district. Even though Costco is in a different zoning district it will still need the approval first. The grant has not been decided upon yet and there is still no set date. Assuming the town board approves the GSS request and the zoning board approves the variance request, Costco will go back to the Town Board.

Attorney Michael Shanker, a representative for merchants and residents of North Lawrence and Woodmere, says the proposed gas station could potentially create a dangerous situation as they take parking spaces. "That's why they are here ? to get the variances," he says. "If there aren't enough parking spaces it is possible that it will create a dangerous situation because people are backed up and trying to get in or as they circle around." Shanker does not feel that fear of competition plays a heavy role in the opposition. "I think that most residents are doing this in good faith." In an effort to show to the Town of Hempstead board the potential hazards that could come as a result Shanker is hoping to compile a traffic study report. During the hearing however, he voiced his concerns that he will not be able to compile the study on-time before the next hearing.

Suphi Yildirman, who attended the hearing on behalf of the BP Gas Station, says the road is extremely busy already, especially in holiday months like December and July. His main concern is that Costco's proposed gas station would induce so much traffic that customers would be unable to enter his station. In addition Yildirman says that if the proposal is passed that Costco's gas station would only be 100 meters away from his. "One hundred meters is very close," says Yildirman. Yildirman also says that another gas station would only generate more competition on a strip were there are already so many options. "We already have nine other gas stations. We have a Gulf, we have a Sunoco, we have Shell, we have a BP, we have a Hess and we have a Mobil." He feels that building yet another station will only be another challenge for owners who already face competition on Rockaway Turnpike.

Peter Halperin, a resident Woodmere who travels on Rockaway Turnpike every day is opposed to bill because he says it will create major traffic jam-ups. "It's going to cause a lot of back-up in the Costco parking lot, back-up on the street and just major problems on Rockaway Turnpike that are already there."

Costco's attorney, Daniel Baker says that in the previous public hearing there was no opposition to the proposal. "Nobody showed up at that time," he says. "I haven't spoken to everybody who's here today. I don't know what all their concerns are," he adds. "The only concerns I did hear are from people who have neighboring gas stations." He says that gas station owners are simply concerned that Costco's gas station may infringe upon their business. "New York State doesn't view that as a reason for opposing," he says.

Baker has heard that there are traffic concerns and says that Costco has hired a traffic engineer who has prepared a report which was presented to the town board and will be presented to the zoning board. "That [the report] will state that what Costco is proposing will not have any adverse or negative impacts on any existing conditions, meaning whatever traffic numbers and flow exist now will not increase in any negative way if this application is approved and they put in a gas station.

Although Mayor Martin Oliner says he is a big fan of Costco, even saying "there is no better store in America," he is concerned that an additional gas station will create more traffic in the area. He suggested that a better location for Costco to build its proposed station would be behind the mega store on Bay Boulevard. "I think the store personally is a great store but on the other hand if it's on Rockaway Turnpike it's just from a traffic point of view, not a good idea," he says. Mayor Oliner says that at first glance citizens are concerned about traffic so he would like to see what Costco's plans are to alleviate the potential problems. "What I've asked for

and what I still need to see are the traffic studies," he adds. "I am far from convinced that it won't have a hazardous impact on traffic and if it would, then I would certainly be against it."

The next hearing is scheduled for August 1 at 2:00 p.m. at Hempstead's Town Hall located on 1 Washington Street in Hempstead.

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