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## Quit Picking On Wal-Mart

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Plant City is growing. Some of the latest attractions include our first Chili's and a new Wendy's. There's now talk about more national chains moving in, including a new Wal-Mart Supercenter. According to the Tribune, the retailer has submitted its plans for the new store to the city.

And just as with every other small town, with the arrival of a corporate giant like Wal-Mart, there are those who plead the case of the little man - particularly the store's employees.

Beyond the hindrances like building and zoning requirements that Wal-Mart will face, there is resistance from those who just seem to detest Wal-Mart and everything it stands for. They see the arrival of the giant retailer as the end of small business in a community. They see the low prices as an indication that low wages are paid to the employees.

Many seem to ignore the benefit low prices bring to many low- and middle-income families. Their only concern is supposedly for those who they seem to believe are somehow forced into working for Wal-Mart and receiving poor pay and benefits in return.

One of my friends works at Wal-Mart. He said he started off at \$6 per hour when he was hired six years ago. He said new employees start off higher than that now. He also noted that although the retailer does offer health insurance and a 401(k) plan, he believes a lot of employees who are just starting out can't afford the benefits. This and other reasons lead him to believe that Wal-Mart is not good for America.

Then there is the consumer's point of view. Wal-Mart is probably the place I shop at the most. I started off where I work at the same pay as my Wal-Mart friend, and I don't make as much as he does currently. And the Tribune doesn't pay us community columnists. As a result, I find Wal-Mart prices to be more accommodating to my income.

Likewise, my friend told me that he and his wife shop at Wal-Mart "all the time." He said it's because of the combination of lower prices, the fact that they have everything in one store and his employee discount. Yet he still believes the company is not good for the employees (low pay) or the consumers (puts the competition out of business).

But no one is forced to work for Wal-Mart or any company in this country. Also, those who are just starting out have the opportunity to move up in the company and earn more, as my friend has. Those just starting out probably

shouldn't expect their pay and benefits to cover all their life expenses anyway. When I started my job, I certainly didn't expect that.

Employees are free to work somewhere else, just as consumers are free to shop somewhere else. The fact that so many people shop at Wal-Mart is surely an indication of something. You don't hear too many stories about the retailer having trouble finding employees either. I remember applying for a job at Wal-Mart when I was in high school and not hearing anything back.

Wal-Mart has proved to be a winner in our free-market system, despite those who dislike the company. If competitors want to win, whether they are national retailers or local mom and pop stores, they have to be better than Wal-Mart in the eyes of the consumers. Otherwise, they can go on complaining about the retailer and accomplish nothing.

The only thing that I personally dislike about Wal-Mart is the crowd of shoppers. Though I'm only 5'3" and around 125 pounds, even without a shopping cart, I still find it hard to maneuver through the sea of humanity that clutters each aisle at the current Plant City Wal-Mart Supercenter. Some people will tell you that everything Wal-Mart stands for is wrong. But judging by the crowds, Wal-Mart must be doing something right.

Adam Fowler has a degree in political science from the University of South Florida.

Photo credit: Associated Press file photo

Photo: Wal-Mart hopes to build a new supercenter store in Plant City.

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