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Big boxes of scorn heaped on Duluth Wal-Mart

Issues of class, crime are cited, but some locals tie the dispute to a fear of unstoppable growth in Gwinnett.

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It may be one of the most routine experiences in American life: heading to Wal-Mart to buy groceries, some clothes or a bike.

It's so common that the world's largest retailer expects to open a new U.S. store, on average, every other day this year.

Most open with little fanfare. Yet in some places — such as Duluth — word that the giant is coming will shake the community like little else can.

People flood City Hall. They shout. They question the chain's impact on everything from local businesses to the environment to its own employees.

In Duluth, controversy has raged since Wal-Mart unveiled plans to build a 176,305-square-foot Supercenter on Peachtree Industrial Boulevard.

People have packed meetings, carried protest signs, collected signatures and fired off angry e-mails. The City Council imposed a six-month moratorium on large-scale developments to study their impact. The man who wants to sell 27 acres to Wal-Mart, Jack Bandy, has sued Duluth and the city's Zoning Board of Appeals.

To Wal-Mart spokesman Glen Wilkins, the company's commitment to Duluth is an example of its strategy of building near customers.

To critics, the debate is tied up in a larger conversation about issues such as "quality of life" and "community." Underpinning it all is a frustration with Gwinnett County's years of seemingly unstoppable development.

"Fatigue is a big part of it," said Mark Williams, chairman of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District, a group of businesses that tax themselves to pay for community improvements.

