

Vermont Environmental Report

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A PYRAMID MALL in WILLISTON:

Will it Come--Will it Hurt?

1. Introduction

Battle lines are forming in Chittenden County over a proposal by the Pyramid Companies of Dewitt (Syracuse), New York, to build a \$10 million, 80-store enclosed shopping mall on 67 acres of hayfield in the Town of Williston.

The proposed mall, according to the developer's timetable, would open for business in the Spring of 1978. It would be built at the intersection of Routes 2 and 2A, six miles east of Burlington, adjacent to Exit 12 on Interstate 89.

On July 14, the Williston Planning Commission, after months of seesawing deliberations, voted 6-1 to approve the Pyramid Mall subdivision application. This vote means that the plans for development will almost certainly go forward to the District (4) Environmental Commission for Act 250 review. State planners in Montpelier describe the proposed mall as "the largest commercial development ever to come under review by Act 250."

Of all the issues raised by the Pyramid proposal, these are among the most crucial. First, the apparent helplessness of small, semi-rural communities, standing in the path of urban expansion. Williston is a town of 4,400 people. Citizens who oppose the mall are distressed by the thought that there may be nothing

they can do to arrest the play of market forces, an inundation of roads, industrial and commercial development, people and houses, that will radically alter the character of what was once a country town.

A second issue is the effectiveness of Act 250, Vermont's basic land use and development law. Act 250 has been tested before, but never quite in this way, with an application of this size and complexity. In this test of Act 250, State officials will be facing an aggressive, well-financed, development company. The question is whether the State agencies who must submit their own evidence in the Act 250 hearings will be prepared with solid, well-documented, expert testimony. Certainly the Pyramid Companies will have such representation. Here the role of Governor Richard Snelling will be pivotal. He has the power to invoke the active intervention of the State in demanding a thorough and far-reaching review of the project. Or he can sabotage the proceedings, with superficial investigations of the issues and nominal presentations before the District Environmental Commission.

2. Proposed Mall

Gary Craig, a partner in the Pyramid Companies, explained the business rationale behind the Williston Mall.