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Give Life to History. SM

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October 18, 2004

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL: bmallison@state.pa.us

Ken Bowman
Southwest Regional Director
Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection
400 Waterfront Drive
Pittsburgh PA 15222

Dear Mr. Bowman:

The Young Preservationists Association of Pittsburgh (YPA) appreciates this opportunity to comment on the proposed Wal-Mart Supercenter in Kilbuck.

Formed in 2002, the YPA is a broad-based regional coalition of dynamic preservation leaders organized to ignite a new historic preservation movement in southwestern Pennsylvania. Through educational workshops, tours, and research, we encourage preservationists of all ages to engage themselves in civic affairs that affect their communities. YPA believes that history serves as an important guide to motivate and inspire us, as well as a model for how to create prosperous communities.

GENERAL COMMENTS ABOUT THE PROPOSED WAL-MART SUPERCENTER

YPA is opposed to the \$28 million proposed development because the location is a historically significant site, the former historic Dixmont State Hospital in Kilbuck, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Dixmont Hospital is also a major preservation priority for Allegheny County. In addition to being listed on Preservation Pennsylvania's 2004 "At Risk" list, Dixmont Hospital was identified as the Number Eight preservation priority in Allegheny County by a focus group meeting we held on September 20, 2004. This effort was part of YPA's New Frontiers in Preservation project designed to prioritize historic preservation issues in southwestern Pennsylvania.

YPA is not opposed to Wal-Mart; we are opposed to the location chosen for the proposed development. YPA supports Citizens First!'s efforts to block this development, which is not suitable for the site, and select a more appropriate location that does not have an adverse impact on historic and natural resources.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE¹

Founded by Dorothea Dix, a 19th century mental health reformer, the Dixmont State Hospital holds considerable historic significance. Dix was nationally known for her reforms in prisons and insane asylums in the 1800s. She brought this need to the attention of western Pennsylvania residents through her graphic descriptions of conditions at the Allegheny County Jail. In the 1850s, she visited Pittsburgh frequently to meet and discuss with prominent Pittsburgh business, medical, and legal leaders to raise funds, select a site, and design the hospital. It was Dix who chose the location for the 453-acre site on a prominent hillside overlooking the Ohio River.

Dixmont hospital was among the first in the nation to abolish the use of restraints as a method of treatment for the insane.

Construction on Reed Hall, the main hospital structure, began on May 1, 1859 and a cornerstone was laid on July 19, 1859. The main building was designed as a central rectangular core structure, with flanking wings, terminating in square-end structures. The central core and square terminus buildings are four stories high. Romanesque in style, the core section had a square tower, which was removed at a later date.

Opened in 1859 with 140 patients, Dixmont State Hospital was originally named the Department of the Insane in the Western Pennsylvania Hospital of Pittsburgh. By 1900, the hospital supported nearly 1,500 patients. In 1907, the facility was individually incorporated as the Dixmont Hospital for the Insane after separating from the Western Pennsylvania Hospital system.

Dixmont was designed to be a self-sustaining facility, complete with its own farmlands, livestock, rail station, and post office. In addition, part of the facility was a water treatment plant, a sewage treatment plant, and electricity generating facilities. Dixmont supported its own butchers, bakers, farmhands, electricians, laborers, pipe fitters, botanists, chefs, and even a barber and a dentist.

In 1947, responding to dire financial troubles at the hospital, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania took over operations at the facility and renamed it Dixmont State Hospital. A reduction in funds during the 1960s and '70s, along with a declining patient population eventually led the state Department of Public Welfare to close the hospital in 1984 as part of a consolidation of mental health facilities. Dixmont is one of three major state mental institutions in Western Pennsylvania to close in the past 20 years, as part of an overall and still controversial effort to move special populations out of state institutions and back into communities.

¹ Sources: National Register of Historic Places Inventory Form, online at http://www.arch.state.pa.us/pdfs/H001767_01B.pdf. Dixmont State Hospital website, <http://www.dixmontstatehospital.com/>. Ohio Trespassers website, <http://www.ohiotrespassers.com/dixmont.html>. Jan Ackerman, "A mental hospital's breakdown," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, April 20, 2003, <http://www.post-gazette.com/lifestyle/20030420dixmont2.asp>. *Pittsburgh Tribune Review*, "Hospital owner still seeks buyers," June 28, 2000, <http://www.phlf.org/phlfnews/mediaclips/2000/000628tr.html>.

RECENT HISTORY

Today, the grounds include the remnants of 24 hospital buildings, garages and dumps. Over the years the property has suffered from fire, vandalism and abandonment. However, Dixmont has piqued the interest of amateur ghost hunters, Dorthea Dix fans, and even filmmakers. In 1999, the Ford Motor Co. used a Los Angeles-based film company to shoot a commercial at Dixmont to introduce a new heavy duty Ford pickup truck.

In 2002, proposals surfaced to demolish the remainder of Dixmont Hospital and re-develop the site as a major big box retail outlet. Based on a request by the owners to remove Reed Hall from the National Register, a site visit in July 2002 by Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission staff concluded that Reed Hall continued to be recognizable as nationally significant. A local group, Communities First!, has been advocating for the preservation of the site, but lost a Common Pleas Court decision in late July. Communities First! plans to appeal and engage in other efforts to defeat the proposed project.

BASIS FOR YPA'S POSITION

The Young Preservationists Association supports the efforts of residents of Kilbuck and surrounding areas to determine their own future. Many residents of Kilbuck, as well as residents in the surrounding towns of Glenfield and Emsworth, oppose the construction of a Wal-Mart Supercenter on the former Dixmont Hospital site. We support the Citizens First! position that the proposed Wal-Mart in Kilbuck is the wrong development for the wrong location. They argue that Wal-Mart would not be appropriate for that site because it would increase traffic congestion along Ohio River Boulevard and have a deleterious effect on retail in the communities along this corridor, many of which are struggling to recover from decades of population and job losses.

Opponents to the Wal-Mart further argue that the county and state should not encourage the demolition of valuable historic properties for big-box retailers. Instead, federal agencies should support the restoration of historic resources and the revitalization of older towns and boroughs, including their historic main street corridors, consistent with the recommendations in the Brookings Institution study, *Back to Prosperity: A Competitive Agenda for Renewing Pennsylvania*.

The YPA believes that the proposed Wal-Mart Supercenter would be detrimental to valuable historic resources in the Kilbuck community. The development would severely affect the environment of the property, part of which sits on a steep hillside. The most negative environmental impact of the Wal-Mart development would be the construction of a 10,000-car parking lot which would create drainage problems for both sewage and gray water runoff. In keeping with Section 102 of the National Environmental Policy Act, the YPA suggests that federal agencies complete an environmental impact statement that considers the Wal-Mart proposal as a "major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment."

YPA believes the DEP and other relevant state agencies should take action to mitigate the detrimental impact this development would have on sensitive environmental and historic resources, consistent with state law. According to the Pennsylvania History Code, Title 37, Chapter 5, DEP is required to have fully in effect established procedures and policies that “contribute to the preservation and enhancement of all historic resources in this Commonwealth.” In addition, consistent with Section 508, Interagency Cooperation, Commonwealth agencies shall: “(4) Institute procedures and policies to assure that their plans, programs, codes, regulations and activities contribute to the preservation and enhancement of all historic resources in this Commonwealth.”

It is important that the state and southwestern Pennsylvania in particular craft and apply policies that encourage the restoration and enhancement of older towns and boroughs, including individual historic sites, and devote resources toward their preservation. Auto-dependent sprawl-type development has not helped the Pittsburgh region reverse decades of decline. Better solutions to economic growth should be built around preservation and reuse of our historic and natural assets.

The YPA appreciates this opportunity to comment on the proposed development in Kilbuck. Please contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Dan Holland
Chair
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Appendix Attached

APPENDIX

Historic Images of Dixmont



Reed Hall (photo date unknown)



Reed Hall in the 1970s.



Dixmont Hospital in the early 1900s.



Dixmont was self-sufficient, supporting its own livestock.