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## Coffee wars brewing in Medfield

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As America marches faithfully forward atop the conveyor belt of progress, small communities have grappled with the implications of national chain retail staking claim into the heart and soil of their townships, giving rise to a particularly polarizing dilemma.

The desperate quest for sales tax revenues oftentimes places public officials in smaller communities squarely on the side of national merchants. Recently, here in Medfield, town officials' refusal to consider rezoning for businesses and condominiums to stack themselves on the Montrose School property fizzled hopes for a tidy sum of tax money to pour in. For many locals, this decision was viewed as a profitable opportunity lost, a stunting of economic growth. Moreover, chain advocates claim that these stores expand consumer choice and offer better consumer value, but another, perhaps louder voice in Medfield would argue that chain stores should have a severely limited, if not completely nonexistent, place in the community, end of discussion.

There can be no doubt that a growing trend of chain invasion within the commercial ranks and the evolving composition of Medfield commerce are in the public interest. The downtown intersection of North and Main Streets in Medfield, that is, the property being courted by Dedham's Salvatore Capital Partners LLC for the development of an eventual Starbucks business, is where the latest debate is currently taking center stage.

Similar instances in nearby neighborhoods are as commonplace. Chains sprawl. That's what they do. So routine it is, in fact, that it's when a chain doesn't close the deal and absorb another slab of property that the news is stirred to claim something amiss.

In last Saturday's issue of the Globe, Erin Ailworth wrote about Walmart's abandoned efforts to build stores in Somerville and Watertown. The mega-retailer claims the locations would lack in sufficient profitability to justify the investment. Walmart spokesman, Steven Restivo explains, "One of the primary deciding factors on any given site – whether it's in an urban, suburban or rural market – is that it makes sense from a business perspective and contributes to our bottom line."

It's hard to imagine Walmart having difficulty making a profit anywhere. They break dirt, lay down a parking lot, the cars come flocking, and how. The Main Street competition, they get slaughtered, drained and cured in the store's wake until only other chains, with the support to weather any recessive storms, dare to move in. But, low and behold, there's a part of this story that's unique to most of the others. It's the part where Somerville and Watertown pushed back, and people took notice.

The negative reactions there were loud and expansive. Protestors in Watertown staged a rally opposing Walmart construction. They were upset about increased traffic and the threat to local merchants. An anti-Walmart activist with the GRO, Sprawl-Busters, even blazed in and organized a grassroots opposition. Front lawns were soon spangled with 'No Walmart, No Big Boxes' signs. It was a movement, a backlash against something glared over with reprehending eyes from a local community unwilling to give any ground. In Medfield, a similar game is afoot, albeit a bit more caffeinated.

With the probable addition of a second Dunkin Donuts, plus the aforementioned Starbucks ensemble possibly squatting down later this year, something of a coffee war has erupted in the town, and one has to wonder the mood that's percolating amongst the area's longstanding, locally-locked coffee house presence. "I think it's a disaster. How many more coffee houses does the town really need?" asks a local coffee vendor, concerned over the recurring trend.

Regardless of which side of the fence one stands, when looking at it from a standpoint of economic impact, some essential facts worth looking at tend to seep up.

A ten-year case study of local merchants versus chain retailers in several communities by Civic Economics, a U.S. economic analysis and strategic planning consultancy, found that local merchants have a substantially greater economic impact than chains on their surrounding communities, particularly when looking at this impact based on locally focused expenditures of the retailers, including such items as labor, profits, goods and services.

For starters, local merchants spend a much larger portion of their total revenue on local labor to run the enterprise and sell their product, and the usually modest profits they earn by comparison stay in the local economy. Chain retailers, on the other hand, despite the fact they may generate an increase in overall sales of a given product, tend to produce three times less local economic return on consumer revenue than local equivalents. "Basically all of our distributors are local, and we directly support the food pantry, senior centers, local churches, school functions-- we donate leftovers every day," says Dan Friedman, co-owner of the Blue Moon Bagel Cafe, a family-owned gem with a heralded reputation that's been serving Medfield and visitors from afar for years.

Local merchants, while adding to the unique vibrancy of the community they work in, are also far more likely to provide strong support for local artists and creative students through marketing campaigns and in-house exhibitions, creating a more poignant cultural impact than their chain counterparts. Friedman adds, "We support all types of community events and we love doing it. When schools need to do a fundraiser, they come to local stores because a chain won't even talk to them."

In terms of local businesses vying for survival against their corporate competitors, an interesting dynamic emerges. The inclusion of chain retailers in smaller communities brings a complementary line of goods to the market, leading to heightened interest and awareness of this good. This could mean, for example, that a consumer who doesn't frequent coffee houses and is suddenly turned on to Starbucks might be more inclined to browse a few of Medfield's other options like Blue Moon or Honeydew when they wouldn't have before, but as in the case with Beo Lin, local owner of the Donut Express and Cake Bakery, Dunkin Donuts moving in next door makes the means of surviving become insidiously adverse. "For four years, I have had to keep my prices the same. They haven't changed at all and that keeps customers loyal. But then I also have to allow credit card charges for everything because that's what Dunkin can do. So, if you buy a coffee for \$1.65 with a credit card, I'm charged twenty-five cents for it. I'm glad to do, of course, but the reality is we take a big hit for it, for low prices and all those transactions."

A kind of uneasiness echoes from coffee competitors, but there is another tone in this sound. It's one of smoldering confidence and determination. "Luckily," adds Lin, "improving my overall quality of ingredients has always worked and always will work. I get here at three o'clock in the morning, every day to make the products as fresh as possible." Friedman, no stranger to slaving over roll of dough, compares his routine with chain retailers, "I'm an artisan baker. It takes three days to make this product.

You'll never find that kind of attention and care with a chain. These are old world techniques that enhance the flavor, but it takes time to do it right." If it does come down to taste and quality in these coffee wars, consumers will have to vote with their dollars, and a worthy victor will inevitably rise from the dust.

For now, one thing is certain. Medfield's identity is undergoing some dramatic changes, and the intersection of North and Main Street has now unwittingly become ground zero of a brave new world.