

OPINION

ORLA CASTANIEN

More big-box stores won't alter city's shopping habits



Chicago is blessed with a rich diversity in retailing. Throughout the city, there are thousands of retailers that not only contribute tax revenue, but also something far more valuable—they offer unique products and contribute to the character of the neighborhoods that make Chicago unique.

CRAIN'S recently reported on an analysis that showed Chicago shoppers spend \$6.5 billion a year on goods outside the city limits. But I question the conclusion that the city doesn't have enough retailers to meet shoppers' demand.

Chicago is not understored. It is undershopped.

The retail drain is a problem for all of Chicago: The city loses revenue, businesses lose sales and eventually, residents will lose their neighborhood stores, along with the vitality that makes us proud of the places we live.

Why are Chicagoans leaving the city to shop? It isn't because of a lack of choice. Chicago already

has both large and small stores, including most national chains, within the city limits. Attracting a few more big-box stores is not going to change residential shopping habits. In fact, if we follow the premise that attracting more large stores hurts the smaller stores, then the city risks creating more empty shop fronts.

Resident groups have consistently opposed establishing large chains in their neighborhoods,

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fearing the traffic congestion that might result. (Think back to Ikea's attempts to enter Lincoln Park.) Yet, city residents are still willing to be part of outbound traffic congestion toward the suburban malls.

The lack of parking is always near the top of any list of complaints about neighborhood retailing. The city needs to work with retailers to tackle these issues in a comprehensive way.

But responsibility doesn't lie with City Hall alone. Retailers and residents need to realize that they depend on each other to maintain the vibrancy of neighborhoods. Working with local community groups, I am consistently told how wonderful it is to have small boutique stores in their neighborhoods—yet when I introduce myself to my own neighborhood associations, many of these residents have never been in my store.

Here in the Armitage-Halsted retail district on the North Side, we are grateful to residents who have supported us and have made it possible for us to operate. We all need to be aware of our actions and how they affect our surroundings if we are to ensure that Chicago retains its revenue along with its businesses, shoppers, tourists and neighborhoods.

This is not an issue of small businesses against large. It is a question of what sort of city Chicago wants to be. We need leadership from city government, businesses and neighborhoods to find solutions that will provide the revenue and the character that makes Chicago such a great place to live, work and shop.

Orla Castanien is owner of Nuada, a Lincoln Park store that features contemporary home and personal fashions from Ireland.

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