



Column: Pudgy's, Panera and 'progress'

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The best cheese Danish pastries (in the world, I'm sure) were a weekly staple of my childhood. Every Friday, my mother and I would go to Pudgy's, a local bakery in the heart of our small town, and celebrate the start of the weekend.

In the spring of 2007, my sophomore year of college, my parents called me with sad news: Pudgy's had closed.

I've spent the greater portion of my adolescence in the suburban town of Orchard Park, N.Y., just south of Buffalo. At the heart of my town is the Village of Orchard Park. With its main street and locally owned businesses and restaurants such as Pudgy's, the Village provides the small town sense of community that I have grown to love.

Aside from its impeccable streets, Orchard Park has always been proudest of its refusal to welcome corporate chains into the Village. Except for a Subway sandwich shop, the Village was devoid of chains, allowing local businesses to flourish.

After much debate among the town council, the fall of 2006 saw the construction of a new plaza in the center of the Village, marking the beginning of the commercialization of Orchard Park. The plaza opened in December, boasting an array of retail clothing shops, anchored by a Panera Breads restaurant. Since its opening, business has been booming.

Unfortunately, only months after the commercial bakery and restaurant that is Panera opened, Pudgy's closed, and it was followed by the closing of a number of local cafes. Months—that's all it took for commercial chains to suck the crowds and the life out of our local favorites.

Now, just when I've begun to come to terms with what happened to Pudgy's and our other local eateries, convincing myself to look at this "progress" as an economic catalyst for the Village, the most dreaded retailer of all is looking to move just a few miles outside of the Village.

Yes, it's Wal-Mart. If a single Panera Breads has inflicted what I consider to be havoc on Orchard Park, what will a Wal-Mart do?

Based on the track record of big box stores, the outlook isn't good.

Big box stores, by definition, occupy more than 50,000 square feet of space, profit from large volumes of sales and provide no unique culture to their home communities. They threaten the quirks that make America intriguing. In 2004, the National Trust for Historic Preservation went as far as naming the state of Vermont one of the 11 "Most Endangered Historic Places," largely because of Wal-Mart's plans to open seven new stores in the culture-rich state.

Many towns are skeptical about local economic problems caused by big box stores, putting faith in the community to continue supporting local businesses. However, this rarely proves to be true.

In 1997, Kenneth Stone, a professor of economics at the Iowa State University, studied the effects of big box stores and found that the average Iowa consumer spent 42 percent more in big box stores in 1996 than in 1983, simultaneously spending 59 percent less in more specialized retail stores.

With the increase in commercial spending and shoppers' lack of support for specialized shops, towns across America are seeing the downfalls of hometown stores. The National Trust for Historic Preservation recently reported that for every 2,000 square feet of a "Main Street" store that closes, the local economy loses nearly \$250,000 a year. In a small town, that money adds up.

Stone also noted that despite the perils caused by big box stores, surrounding businesses offering goods other than those found in the corporate giants can actually benefit. But really, at this point, what can't you find in Wal-Mart?

With the multi-billion dollars of business that big box stores do each year, it seems as if it would be impossible to prevent this invasion of small towns. However, it isn't.

In June, Maine passed the Informed Growth Act, a law that requires towns to survey the economic effects of large-scale retail development. The idea is that towns will then approve only the projects that will not have negative effects on the local economy.

This type of legislation, the first in the nation, is a start to preserving small town economies and charm. It is a rational design for communities to decide whether or not big box stores have a place in their town.

If the Informed Growth Act of Maine becomes a practice in more states, not only will we preserve our economy, but we will preserve our

character. It appears that Orchard Park is going to survive Panera Breads, but its fate is more questionable when Wal-Mart is the threat.

I suppose that I can get by without a great cheese Danish, but without the character of my hometown? Not likely.

Stephanie Schomer is a junior majoring in journalism. She wrote this column for Professor Russ Eshleman's Comm 464 class.