

Citizens group forms in city of Hartford

By PHILLIP HERMANN
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The negative reaction generated by the recent approval for construction of a new 184,000-square-foot Wal-Mart Supercenter in the city of Hartford has spurred a group of residents to form a new citizens group.

Named the Hartford Citizens for Responsible Government, the group began meeting in early April to lay the groundwork for incorporating with the state as a nonprofit organization. HCRG also has filed with the city as a Political Action Committee.

One of the group's founders, Ray VonGunten, said Wal-Mart was the catalyst for the action, but the group's focus hopes to go far beyond monitoring the progression of the often controversial mass retailer.

"It became clear to us during the Wal-Mart process that the city council wasn't listening to people and their concerns," VonGunten said.

"This organization will provide residents with a forum to express their concerns and to let the peoples' voice be heard. That's the main reason we formed — to give the people of Hartford another voice, a political voice and one that these guys will listen to."

The group's next meeting is scheduled for Monday, May 8 at 6:30 p.m. at the Paradise Restaurant on Grand Avenue. HCRG has also created a Web site at www.hartfordcrg.org that will contain information about future meetings. The group is affiliated with the statewide Citizens for Responsible Government.

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VonGunten said the group will also focus on issues relating to growth and whether the city is growing too fast to maintain a high quality of life for its residents.

"We really want to examine those growth-related issues, like traffic, and the impact that the city's growth is having on the infrastructure and services," VonGunten said.

In March, Another organizer, chosen as the spokesperson for the group, is Hartford resident Marilyn Raschka. Raschka ran unsuccessfully as a write-in candidate against incumbent District 2 Alderman James Core in the recent election.

She was spurred to political action by her opposition to the Wal-Mart plan and said she believes others should get involved in the city's future.

"Every city needs a group and residents need to be more involved.

"We just need to get going and get involved," Raschka noted, adding that the low voter turnout in the recent city election indicates a certain level of apathy. "We hope that any citizen who has a concern about something that affects all of us will join us."

She said that her involvement in opposition to the Wal-Mart shaped her view that city employees and elected officials "need to be more accountable" on some issues. That won't happen until residents get involved, she added.

Hartford Mayor Scott Henke said that he supports all forms of "citizen involvement."

He added, "Whether it's one-on-one with me or their alderperson or as a group, citizen involvement at any level is great for the city."

Henke also noted that voter turnout for recent city elections has been low and he hopes the new group will have a positive impact on that negative trend.

"The ultimate form of citizen involvement is when we have these elections.

"Frankly, the turnout for the last few has not been good and anything that can affect that trend is a good thing," Henke concluded.