

forum news

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Chain Drugstores on Main Street: Some Positive Trends

by Cristina Prochilo

The retail marketplace in America in the late 1990s and after has been dominated by large corporations making news with their expansions and acquisitions. National chain drugstores have fit that model, pursuing expansion policies throughout the country. Walgreen, CVS/pharmacy, Rite Aid, and Eckerd, the four industry leaders, have expanded at an aggressive pace by acquiring smaller chains, opening new stores, and relocating existing stores to larger spaces.

As chain drugstore companies vie for name recognition and market dominance, they prefer to locate at prominent intersections—at “The Corner of Main and Main.” Historic buildings frequently occupy the

chosen sites, serving as downtown anchors or gateways to traditional downtown corridors. These prime locations make them vulnerable to demolition, and historic buildings have been lost at an alarming rate.

The new buildings that replace the demolished ones further undermine the character of Main Street. In the battle for industry dominance, coupled with the trend of moving away from strip mall developments, major chains feel a competitive need to build large (10,000- to 14,000-square-foot) freestanding stores requiring increased frontage, lots of adjacent parking, and drive-through windows.

Presently Walgreen is the largest company in terms of sales,

tallying over \$24 billion during 2001. Walgreen is actively expanding in the Atlanta, Los Angeles, and San Diego markets. Even including the recent closure of 200 stores, CVS/pharmacy remains the largest company based on store count, with more than 4,000 stores nationwide. CVS/pharmacy is, additionally, the largest retail provider of prescriptions in the country. CVS/pharmacy’s expansion plans include further introduction into the Chicago, Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Tampa markets. On the other end of the spectrum, Rite Aid and Eckerd’s expansion plans have slowed significantly since the late ’90s due to corporate deficits.

Still, current market forces favor more expansions by the chain drugstores. The rise in managed healthcare and an aging population are the most notable factors driving growth, along with a record number of drugs approved by the FDA.

But there have been some promising new developments since *Forum News* last reported on the threats to communities posed by chain drugstores (“Chain Drugstores on Main Street,” by Anne Stillman, *Forum News* September/October 1998, Vol. 5, No. 1).



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*This new Walgreen store on Boylston Street in Boston was designed to complement neighboring buildings.
Photo by Jessica Zullinger.*

CHAIN DRUGSTORES



With help from the National Trust, a St. Petersburg, Fla., neighborhood negotiated for this revised design that saved three contributing structures in a national historic district and better suited the surroundings
Photo by James W. Martin.

Action by the National Trust

The National Trust began receiving numerous calls from statewide preservation organizations and community groups in the late 1990s asking for help in fighting proposals for new drugstores that called for demolishing historic buildings and replacing them with a chain's standard cookie-cutter style of stores. In response, the National Trust commissioned industry research that concentrated on how communities might persuade the chains to abandon their big-box designs in favor of buildings that better suit Main Street; and National Trust Vice President, Programs, Peter Brink led meetings with the four major chains' real estate vice presidents. As a follow up, the National Trust

listed "The Corner of Main and Main" on its 1999 list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places.

These efforts produced results. The National Trust has since been successful in securing an agreement that Walgreen, CVS/pharmacy, Rite Aid, and Eckerd will avoid demolishing buildings listed individually in the National Register of Historic Places. The National Trust has also established an early warning system with these four major chains.

Action at the Community Level

Many communities have also been able to take action locally to save and protect their historic places. Here are some recent examples:

Albany, N.Y.: In the spring of 2000, the Preservation League of New York State and the Historic Albany Foundation, Inc., working with the National Trust, persuaded Eckerd to withdraw its proposal to demolish a historic school building eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. In August 2001 Brighter

Choice Charter School reached an agreement with Albany to buy the former school, known as School 10, for \$500,000. The 1890 two-story brick building had been abandoned for almost a decade. Now, thanks to the efforts of both preservationists and the Brighter Choice Board Charter School, the building is undergoing a \$7 million rehabilitation.

Chicago, Ill.: After much debate, in May 2001 CVS/pharmacy decided it would not construct a new store and drive-through on the site of the historic Milwaukee and Montrose Building in Chicago's Portage Park neighborhood. Built in 1929 by David Saul Klafter, a protégé of Daniel Burnham, the terra cotta building was accidentally left off a citywide survey. The Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois, the National Trust Midwest Office, and the Wilson Avenue Community Association (which sent in more than 570 petition signatures expressing local opposition) were deeply involved in this preservation effort.

Keene, N.H.: During the spring of 2001, Keene's Planning Commission approved a strip mall development with CVS/pharmacy as the major tenant. The proposed site included two mid-19th-century brick buildings built as worker housing for the Faulkner & Colony Mill, the largest mill in Keene's history. A local ad hoc group, Save the Mill Buildings Now!, banded together to save the buildings from demolition. Moving the buildings was the only option since the city had approved the site plan. Keene has no preservation ordinance.

The buildings remain unlandmarked. The National Trust Northeast Office was in close contact with Save the Mill Buildings Now! regarding strategy and technical assistance for its grassroots campaign. Efforts to save the structures were given a considerable lift by the Keene Housing Authority, which fronted half of the moving cost. The building titles

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The Captain Stephen Storm House in Westfield, N.Y. (shown in its original location) was successfully moved thanks to cooperation and financial help from CVS/pharmacy. Photo by Jeffrey Harris.

changed hands and the structures were moved on June 13, 2001, just two days before CVS/pharmacy was scheduled to begin development on the site. The buildings will become part of the Harper Acres Assisted Living Complex.

Memphis, Tenn.: In fall 2000 the National Trust Southern Office joined with the Memphis Landmarks Commission in defeating a Walgreen proposal to construct a new store in midtown Memphis. Memphis City Council rejected the proposal outright; it felt the proposal infringed upon the residential character of the East Parkway area surrounding the site.

St. Petersburg, Fla.: In 2000 CVS/pharmacy submitted a proposal for a new 10,880-square-foot drugstore on a half block of downtown St. Petersburg. The intersection is the gateway to the Old Northeast/North Shore area, the city's foremost historic residential neighborhood. The project required the demolition of the Allendale Apartment Building

and two vernacular Craftsman style buildings with applications pending for listing as contributing structures to the Old Northeast National Register Historic District. The National Trust Southern Office provided intervention funds to hire an architect to negotiate between the neighborhood and CVS/pharmacy on the design of the new drugstore. As a result, the neighborhood convinced CVS/pharmacy to build a store with better building design, parking, and landscaping. In the end, an agreement was struck with CVS/pharmacy to revise the site plan to protect all the threatened historic buildings.

Westfield, N.Y.: In 1999 CVS/pharmacy purchased the Captain Stephen Storm House in Westfield, N.Y., with the intent of demolishing it for an expansion of its existing, adjacent drugstore. In early 2000, the National Trust Northeast Office learned of the threat and contacted CVS/pharmacy to express its concerns. Subsequent negotiations led CVS/pharmacy to donate the house to the Landmark Society of Chautauqua County and allow it to be moved to a new site. CVS/pharmacy agreed to front the cost of the move with the expectation that the Landmark Society and the National Trust would assist in raising funds to cover the costs. The project cost was approximately \$375,000; the National Trust raised \$30,000, the Preservation League of New York State donated \$2,000, and CVS/pharmacy

generously contributed to the remainder. The Captain Storm House was successfully relocated to its new site on August 1, 2000. It has since been reinstated in the National Register of Historic Places.

As development pressures continue, historic downtown buildings around the country remain in danger of being replaced by suburban-style, big-box drugstores. The best chance for saving a community's historic places is to protect them at the local level, particularly through the use of preservation ordinances, design review, and strong zoning provisions. All the communities above, and others across the country, have found success using these measures. Other keys to success include getting involved early, and creating solid partnerships to voice

opposition to inappropriate development.

Getting a new drugstore in the community should be welcome news. Everyone must fill prescriptions at one time or another. Furthermore, the companies should be applauded for their willingness to invest in urban areas that are often underserved. New stores should, however, be developed as good neighbors without demolition of historic buildings and with a design that is amenable to the community and its historic character.

Cristina Prochilo is a field representative with the National Trust Northeast Office, providing fieldwork and technical assistance in Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. She also works as the national liaison with the National Trust's Drugstore Initiative.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation remains vigilant regarding drugstore cases that involve the demolition of historic resources, particularly those listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Please contact your regional office directly when drugstore issues arise. When involved early in a case, it is possible for the National Trust to provide both technical assistance and contact with the drugstore company to help save historic resources in your community.

For more information on the National Trust's Drugstore Initiative please go to www.nthp.org/issues/chain_drugstores.html. For additional information and examples of drugstore projects that complement the historic character of their community read *Better Models for Chain Drugstores*, by Anne Stillman, published by the National Trust's Preservation Books series. For ordering information call (202) 588-6296 or visit www.preservationbooks.org.