

## A Reality Price-Check with Walmart's #1 Enemy

By: Chris Kees

Looking at the town of Greenfield Massachusetts today, you would never suspect that a battle of David versus Goliath had taken place only mere decades ago, with Al Norman at the forefront. Mr. Norman, now a lobbyist for the rights of elderly individuals, may appear unassuming at first glance. However, he is, in reality, one of the main advocates against what could be the greatest threat to small communities our generation has faced: the spread of Big-box stores.

After doing a little research, it will quickly become apparent that Al Norman has quite the resume when it comes to holding back the sprawl of store chains such as Walmart. In addition to his iconic victory in 1993 (more on that in a moment), Mr. Norman has published 2 books on the subject of sprawl, "The Case Against Walmart" and "Slam-Dunking Wal-Mart," as well as been featured in such publications as *Forbes*, where he was called "WalMart's #1 Enemy."

To top it all off, Norman's website Sprawl-Busters.com lists in its "victories" section 431 communities which have successfully beaten back sprawl, many of which were helped by Mr. Norman. With such an impressive list of successes under his belt, one might assume that Mr. Norman has always been involved with the issue of sprawl. Surprisingly, though, it wasn't until 1993 that he truly became involved with the issue.

An English major from the University of Wisconsin, Al Norman originally had no interest in stores like Walmart, or their effects on communities and small towns. He even admits to have had a "Who Cares" attitude in the beginning. However, that all changed when he was approached by a friend who wanted him to campaign against the construction of a Walmart in

Greenfield Massachusetts. His friend, who served on the town council in 1993, was impressed by Mr. Norman's work in politics, and urged him to challenge the coming store. Al Norman agreed.

Over the coming months, Mr. Norman began doing research on the issue, contacting people he knew who could help him with his campaign. The campaign cost nearly \$8000, but by October 1993, and by a very narrow margin, Norman and his supporters were able to rescind the vote of the town council to allow the Walmart to be built. The spectacle drew the attention of the National news, and while Al Norman might not have become a household name, he was certainly on the map as far as the issue of Sprawl was concerned.

After this first victory, Mr. Norman formed a consulting service, which later became his website, and a "playbook" of sorts for tactics on how to fight sprawl. He then authored his books, one of which ("Slam-Dunking Wal-mart") speaks in detail about the Greenfield case, and also traveled to communities in need to lend his assistance.

Today, Al Norman does most of his consulting over the phone, though that doesn't mean he isn't just as engaged with the issue as he was when he was traveling. He is still able to help people get organized, and shows them where to find resources. He also uses his "playbook" to teach people how to do the work he does themselves.

Despite working with so many communities, none really "stand out" to Norman, since every victory against sprawl is just as meaningful as the last. Norman's strategy in dealing with Sprawl is the same, regardless of the size of the store or the community, and when asked about how he deals with the sheer size of corporations like Walmart, Mr. Norman simply replied, "You beat big corporations one community at a time."

Of course, size is only one issue which Mr. Norman and those like him face when confronting big corporations. Perhaps the biggest hurdle, at least in Mr. Norman's eyes, is the large-scale corruption of the land-use system, which is driven primarily by money and power. "Money drives decisions," Mr. Norman pointed out. "Everyone with money is against you, and the biggest challenge to overcome on our end is creating a level playing field." Despite these issues, though, Mr. Norman enjoys the work he does with Sprawl Busters, and genuinely believes that "Tough battles are the only kind worth fighting."

When he's not working to fight sprawl, though, Mr. Norman is just as active in his community, working mostly out of the state house in Boston. He has always been involved in democratic politics, and even helped people get elected, from selectmen and Sheriffs, to Congressmen and State Representatives, and he continues with this work today. Mr. Norman also works with MassHomeCare, which focuses on elder advocacy. He serves as a policy person, and helps to write laws and change regulations in order to protect the rights of the older generation.

When asked how he became interested in politics, Mr. Norman mentioned that a lot of it has to do with the Vietnam War, which had been raging while he was in college. According to him, he "Learned about who had the power, and what they had to do to hold on to it." He also learned what people can do on the individual level to protect their own rights and power, and ever since then he has found himself on fighting for the underdog. As Mr. Norman puts it, "Fighting on the right side of an issue is always a pleasure."

But as much as Mr. Norman has done with Sprawl Busters over the years, he knows that in order to make an impact he must rally many more people to his cause, which is why a lot of

his work with Sprawl Busters has been to teach others how to make a difference in their own communities.

When I asked how people can get involved, he said that “The first step is to look at your community and ask yourself: ‘Am I happy?’” When Mr. Norman asked himself this question in 1993, he looked around and saw the “Degradation of local community” and “Loss of identity” which comes when stores like Walmart move into small towns, and he wasn’t satisfied with that.

“The second step,” he says, once people recognize a problem in their community, “is to start at the local level. Sending “Letters to the editor” is a great way to get your opinion out into the community.” After that, the next step is to gather support, and if possible to form a grass roots group of activists. According to Mr. Norman, Sprawl-Busters had always been a network of volunteers and people telling stories about their communities, and with all of the group’s success it can be easy to forget that it started small in the beginning.

Despite everything which he has accomplished, both with Sprawl Busters and in his personal life, Al Norman remains a modest and easy-going person. He has never been driven by profit in the work he has done, and even when I asked about his books he directed me to where I might find them for the lowest price. For Al Norman, the greatest reward for his work is the difference he makes in the world, and has made in those 431 communities. After all, as he puts it, “The meaning is in the battle.”