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Michael Johnson hoping to persuade Walmart to turn shuttered Madison store into a sports complex

By Abigail Becker Jan 29, 2018



Sam's Club, 7050 Watts Rd. on Madison's far west side, closed Jan. 26. The Boys & Girls Club of Dane County would like Walmart to donate the building to the Club, which would convert it into a regional sports complex and job training facility.

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Dane County Boys and Girls Club CEO Michael Johnson hopes to convince Walmart to turn the shuttered Sam's Club on Madison's west side into a regional sports complex instead of an online sales fulfillment center.

Sam's Club, a division of Walmart Stores, announced the closure of 63 stores nationwide earlier this month. Of those, up to 12 will be converted to eCommerce fulfillment centers, which could include the 7050 Watts Rd. location.

"We're analyzing where the fulfillment centers should be, then we'll take a step back," a Sam's Club spokeswoman said.

Johnson admits the idea of using the space as a regional sports complex is a "longshot" but he is hopeful. He said he is in the process of planning a video conference call with the company, expected to take place in the next two weeks, to discuss the idea.

"I'm trying to influence their thinking as we move forward," Johnson said.

In a letter sent to the company's headquarters in Bentonville, Arkansas, Johnson asked that the company donate the Watts Road building to the Boys and Girls Club, provide lead investment for a retrofitted sports and job training complex and assign a Walmart space planner to work with volunteers to redesign the location.

Johnson's preliminary idea is gaining support in the community.

Dane County Supervisor Carousel Bayrd, District 8, said the vacant building provides a “perfect opportunity” to create a regional sports complex.

“I would love to see Walmart step up and acknowledge they have an opportunity as a big corporation to give back to the community,” Bayrd said.

Bayrd, Johnson and other community members and elected officials intend to support the idea at a press conference scheduled for 11 a.m. Monday at the City County-Building, 210 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

Rep. Lisa Subeck, D-Madison, is behind the project proposal. She said one of the greatest challenges on Madison’s southwest side is a lack of constructive activities for youth in the area.

“While discussions are just beginning, I am hopeful that Wal-Mart will partner with our community to make our southwest Madison neighborhoods stronger by providing the Boys and Girls Club with this space in which to offer new opportunities for children, youth, and families,” Subeck said in a statement.

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