

WAL-WHO?

The Walgreens rumor could be just that

The large posterboard sign in the front window at The Floristry on Delaware Avenue reads, "The rumors of our selling have been greatly exaggerated, with regards to Mark Twain."

The sign is Floristry owner Fann Markel's Twain-like response to the rumor that Walgreens is in the process of buying up her buildings near Gates Circle to build a "big-box" pharmacy there.

If you haven't heard the rumor yet, you're clearly out of the loop. Ever since the *Buffalo News* published an article three weeks ago announcing that the nation's largest drugstore chain was eyeing the block for a new store, the rumor has been firing back and forth across the city, sparking a massive response from preservationists, including an electronic petition that has already garnered more than a thousand signatures.

Certainly a lot of people have heard Walgreens is coming, but, strangely, nobody can confirm it.

The original report, based on the word of an anonymous source, said that Walgreens had made offers to two property owners on the east side of Delaware Avenue, between Gates Circle and Delevan, totaling more than \$1.5 million. The buildings in that stretch are currently mixed-use, housing both businesses and apartments. Businesses in the area include Lotis, The Floristry, Hutch's and Curves for Women.

The reported location has many people scratching their heads, or more likely, clenching their teeth. After all, there's already a Rite Aid pharmacy within spitting distance, and another Walgreens store less than a dozen blocks away, at the corner of Delaware and North. Also, many people who have signed the online petition are afraid that the unique buildings will be demolished and a suburban-style, cookie-cutter store will replace them, or that the Rite Aid will be forced to close.

So far, though, the Walgreens rumor appears to be just that—a rumor.

In an effort to get to the bottom of it, I called Walgreens' corporate offices in Deerfield, Illinois on Tuesday, and had a brief conversation with a pleasant woman named Tiffani Bruce. After clicking her way through an electronic national database, she told me that she couldn't confirm any locations in Buffalo. "We get calls from some publication in Buffalo every week, and at this time we can't confirm it."

She said that Walgreens can only confirm a site once it has approval from the city. Bruce did assure me, however, that they only place stores where research shows there's a "market need for prescription and drugstore services."

So I stopped by the Rite Aid pharmacy just down the way, and asked the pharmacists there if they were having trouble meeting their market's demands. "Not that I've noticed," said pharmacist

Linda Gallo, "but there's a Walgreens up the street that takes a lot of the business, too." Kyle, a pharmacy technician, thought that any plans on Walgreens' part are probably an effort to take some of the prescription market from nearby Millard Fillmore hospital. Both women, who live in the immediate neighborhood, had heard about the proposed store, but neither knew any details.

A call to City Hall revealed little more. Marty Grunzweig from the City Planning Board said that the city hasn't received any proposals from Walgreens. "We haven't heard anything on Walgreens, actually. They haven't been to see us, and they haven't talked to us. They haven't come to us officially in any capacity, it's just rumors. We really don't know what they're doing."

Marc Coppolla, the councilman for the Delaware district, hasn't heard from them, either. Several activists I spoke to were vehemently opposed to the idea of a Walgreens at that location, but none of them had anything concrete, whatsoever.

The existing businesses and property owners on the site seem strong in their opposition to selling and relocating. Back at The Floristry, Fann Markel is fed up with the whole thing. When I stopped in Wednesday morning, she was visibly agitated. "We've been here 30 years," she told me, "and we're not leaving!" In fact, Markel said, "I don't even know who they've got me selling to," referring to activists, "whether it's Walgreens, Wal-Mart, Wegmans, or maybe all three Ws."

What she does know is that she's tired of being accosted every time she leaves the shop.

Meanwhile, Hutch's Restaurant, whose building is owned by Markel, seems to be enjoying the free publicity created by the rumor. Restaurateur Mark Hutchinson recently launched a new radio and print ad campaign for his restaurant, sporting the catch phrase, "We're not going anywhere...are we?" Last week, Hutch's ran an ad in this publication that read, "For now, Hutch's Restaurant stands defiant and strong—reasonably confident that we will stay right where we are, here on Gates Circle."

That hasn't erased the doubts and fears of community members and preservation activists. They ran Walgreens out of the Elmwood Village in 1995, when the company proposed a 14,000-square-foot store at the southeast corner of Elmwood and Forest. Since then, the chain has opened 10 stores locally. Such statistics produce an instinctive fear in the local community that even if the corporate pharmacy doesn't get its way on Delaware—and, even if the rumors bear fruit, it appears that there will be plenty of opposition—it will quietly move on to another neighborhood in its endless quest for "market presence."

For now, though, the mystery abides.

—peter koch

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