

April 12, 2006
Square Feet

Nantucket Votes to Ban Chain Stores >From Downtown

By [STACEY STOWE](#)

NANTUCKET, Mass. — With its soda fountains, cobblestone streets and flower-brimming window boxes, Main Street in this island's downtown area seems preserved in amber. On April 4, residents voted at their annual town meeting to keep it that way, adopting a proposal to ban chain stores and franchises from the core shopping area.

Nantucket, a historic whaling port south of Cape Cod, already had strict rules forbidding neon signs and vinyl siding on its downtown shops, but there was no prohibition on chain stores until Wendy Hudson, a local bookstore owner, proposed one.

On the rest of the island, there is still no legal reason that Wal-Mart or another big-box retailer could not move in, and there are chain gas stations and supermarkets on the outskirts of downtown. But the new bylaw, which was cleared by the island's planning board, limits stores and restaurants in downtown to companies with fewer than 14 identical outlets and fewer than three standardized features among items like trademarks, menus or employee uniforms.

"It reduces the need or desire to go places when they all look the same," said Ms. Hudson, who is the owner of Nantucket Bookworks and co-owner, with her husband, Randy, of Cisco Brewery, an island restaurant. "Nantucket is a hassle to get to, it's expensive, and if, when you got there, you find the same thing at home, it reduces the experience."

Perhaps surprisingly, it was not the prospect of a Wal-Mart or a Dunkin' Donuts on this island — where madras shorts and Range Rovers are summer staples — that prompted Ms. Hudson's proposal, but rather the arrival last year of the impeccably preppy retailer [Ralph Lauren](#) in a store on Main Street.

Mr. Lauren's company paid \$6.5 million for its space, a building that once housed Nantucket Looms, a shop selling woven goods and antiques, founded in 1968 under the direction of the Nantucket Historical Trust. The Looms, now privately owned, relocated to Federal Street. The ban against chain stores will not affect Mr. Lauren's store since it will not be applied retroactively.

The island does have a few chain stores. There is a Grand Union grocery store downtown but a special permit would be necessary if it expanded or changed hands. On the outskirts of the shopping area, there are Mobil gas stations, a Stop & Shop supermarket and a Cumberland Farms convenience market.

Other chain stores have appeared and faded away. Several years ago, a Benetton and a Brookstone set up shop downtown but quickly closed; residents said their side street locations hampered them. The same fate befell a Crabtree & Evelyn store. For a while, a Pizza Hut sold pizzas without displaying the company logo from a shop on the wharf, but that did not last, said Andrew Vorce, director of the Nantucket Planning and Economic Development Commission.

As for the threat that big-box stores might open elsewhere on the island, that seems rather remote. For one thing, the island's winter population is only 10,000. In addition, land prices are high. The average starter building lot is \$495,000 for one-eighth of an acre, Mr. Vorce said. A 20,000-square-foot Wal-Mart would need more than two and a quarter acres, more than \$9 million worth of land, to meet parking and open space requirements, he said.

At the annual town meeting, which began on April 3, about 500 residents considered 83 articles, ranging from zoning changes to mooring regulations. No one challenged Ms. Hudson's proposal. Indeed, many people said that after the Lauren store moved in, they feared a herd of chain stores might follow, trampling the island's charm.

Nantucket is not the first community to ban chain stores from its downtown: [Carmel](#), Calif.; Bristol, R.I.; and Port Townsend, Wash., are among those that have enacted similar bans.

Chris Bonelli, 33, an artist who has lived on Nantucket for 10 years, is pleased. "It's fine the way it is," he said. "If you keep adding things, bigger houses, bigger yacht clubs, it's just going to hurt the island. And how many things do you really need, that you can't do without just because a chain store isn't here?"

While most people shared Mr. Bonelli's relief that, say, Starbucks will not displace the Bean, a bustling coffee shop on Center Street, some had qualms about the ban.

John Dolan, a taxi driver who has lived here two years, said he has to go off the island just to buy affordable staples like underwear and socks. "A chain would bring prices down over all and might be open past 8 p.m.," he said.

Fred Singleton, 50, a house painter who lives on a boat moored in the harbor, said: "Nantucket is not a town any longer. It's a theme park for the rich. If you're going to have a store in the Main Street shopping district, the rents are so high, they're not going to sell \$5 tube socks. It's like Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills."

As much as most people here fiercely defend the island's charm and identity, no one denies that real estate is a driving force. The average home sells for \$2.6 million. Downtown, rents range from \$50 a square foot for leases negotiated many years ago to \$100, said Jason S. Weissman, president of Boston Realty Advisors, a real estate firm with properties on the island.

While the higher-end rents may reflect the island's rich clientele, as in other seasonal communities, Nantucket retailers have only the summer, when the population swells to 40,000, to make a profit.

Others noted that it was not just retailers who were tempted to maximize their returns. Residents who bought their homes 30 years ago for \$300,000 find it hard to resist buyers offering \$3 million.

Christine Silverstein, executive director of Sustainable Nantucket, an organization that seeks to fuel economic growth and maintain the character of the island, said, "What you don't want to end up with is the Caribbean, where you have the rich flying in on jets and the poor who work for them in a tin shanty."

Many shopkeepers and residents on the island said they were worried about the next move of Stephen R. Karp, a billionaire Boston real estate developer who last year spent an estimated \$75 million on cottages, inns, resorts and retail shops in Nantucket. But Mr. Karp, who as landlord to about 100 stores could clearly make more money if high-end chain stores moved in, said he supported the ban.

"We don't think Main Street should look like a mall," said Mr. Karp, who made his fortune as a mall developer. Mr. Karp said chain retailers, whom he would not identify, had approached his development firm to be on the island.

To spur economic development downtown, Mr. Karp, who owns a summer home here, has urged shopkeepers who lease from him to stay open until 8 p.m. and is not shy about suggesting methods of displaying merchandise.

Peter Christiansen, 38, a plumbing contractor who has lived on Nantucket for 11 years, said it made little difference to him as a shopper that the island lacks chain stores that offer less expensive wares and food. But as a businessman, it is another matter.

"I pay \$11 for my espresso martini," he said with a grin as he ate breakfast at the Bean. "But if Home Depot came to town and everybody bought their own fixtures, I'd be hurting. I make a lot of money in markups."