

Will Wawa ever open its convenience stores in central Pennsylvania?



Wawa opened a store in Winter Garden, Florida this month. The chain is aggressively expanding in Florida and New Jersey. (Provided)



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Traveling to Philadelphia or the New Jersey Shore, midstate Wawa fans often swing by the convenience stores for made-to-order hoagies, coffees and smoothies.

Its loyal customers from central Pennsylvania know they have to take advantage of out-of-town trips to satisfy their cravings for Wawa's food.

The convenience store chain doesn't operate any stores in the immediate Harrisburg region. The closest ones are in Lancaster and Berks counties.

So why doesn't the beloved Philadelphia-area chain

CONVENIENCE STORE CHALLENGE

Will Wawa ever open its convenience stores in central Pennsylvania?

Wawa, Turkey Hill, Rutter's or Sheetz: Which convenience store has the best food?

Wawa: How do its hoagies, lobster bisque and soft pretzels rate?

Sheetz: How do its burgers, subs and Junkyard Dogs rate?

Turkey Hill Minit Market: How do its

have its footprint in central Pennsylvania?

Slusheys, pulled pork and ice cream rate?

Wawa didn't return calls for this story but the chain operates 630 stores in six states with its biggest expansions taking place in Florida and New Jersey.

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About five new stores are scheduled to open in Florida this summer.

Last December, Forbes Magazine listed Wawa as 40th on its annual list of the largest private companies in the country. According to the magazine, the gas station and convenience store chain has an estimated revenue of \$9.02 billion annually.

"Look, there's a million guys selling gas. There's a million guys selling subs. There's competition with fast food. If they came in they would come into an overstored marketplace," said Bob Gorland, vice president of Matthew P. Casey & Associates in Harrisburg, which specializes in supermarket site selection and feasibility studies.

Gorland, who said he wouldn't rule out the possibility of a Wawa opening in the Harrisburg region, said the chain likely avoids this area because the market is saturated with Rutter's Farm Stores, Sheetz and Turkey Hill Minit Markets as well as 7-Eleven stores and Hess Express stations.

He compared it to Walgreens which also hasn't expanded into the Harrisburg market likely because of the high number of Rite Aids and CVS stores as well as Targets with pharmacies in the area.

In the convenience store wars, **the Altoona-based Sheetz could be the biggest obstacle** holding Wawa back from entering the market. Sheetz has been aggressive with its expansion, opening multiple stores on the east and west shores in the past year including locations in Lower Paxton Twp. and Hampden Twp.

Last year, **a political pollster stirred up the Wawa vs. Sheetz debate by asking Pennsylvanians their favorite**, although he poll was skewed due to the fact Sheetz has a larger footprint in the state.

Bill Gladstone of the Bill Gladstone Group of NAI CIR in Camp Hill said Wawa had agreements for two properties in the Harrisburg area, one off of Allentown Boulevard in Lower Paxton Twp. and another off of Progress Avenue in Susquehanna Twp., in the late 1990s but backed out of the deals after about one year.

"They must have made a decision internally," Gladstone said. "People speak very highly of them."

He said demographics and logistics - not so much competition - are likely the reasons why Wawa hasn't opened stores here. It might have to do with logistical issues such as the location of Wawa's commissary and food vendors, he added.

Companies also look for particular demographics among potential customers and Wawa might not be seeing the appropriate demographics here, Gladstone said.

Otherwise, he downplayed the idea competition is holding Wawa back.

"I've never seen that before because everyone thinks they have a better mouse trap," he said.