



Tuesday, Apr. 28, 2009

City gets 301 letters on both sides of building Wal-Mart distribution center in Merced

Support, opposition, questions come in at comment deadline.

By SCOTT JASON
sjason@mercedsun-star.com

The first round for public comment on the proposed Wal-Mart distribution center concluded Monday, with the city receiving 301 letters.

The 90-day comment period yielded a mix of support, oppositions and questions on how the project will forever change Merced's landscape.

A final tally for support-versus-opposition was unavailable Monday evening. Two weeks ago, distribution center proponents had been outnumbering opponents by nearly a nine-to-one ratio. About 50 letters had been submitted at that time.

However, during a Merced Alliance for Responsible Growth meeting last week opponents urged about 75 people to write letters to the city before time ran out.

Supporters trumpet the 1,200 full-time jobs that Wal-Mart pledges to create. Opponents say they come at a cost of congested roads and polluted air.

The deadline marks the first hurdle as the project inches closer to a vote by the City Council, which is still months away.

EDAW, the consultant that wrote the technical analysis, must now respond to all the questions and criticisms before releasing the final version of the report.

That version will go before the Planning Commission for a recommendation and to the City Council for approval or denial. Residents will have the chance to give their opinion to both boards.

It's unclear when a vote will take place, Merced planning manager Kim Espinosa explained. The timeline depends on the number of comments and their complexity.

Public agencies, such as Caltrans, Madera County, the Central California Regional Water Quality Control Board and the Native American Heritage Commission offered their thoughts on the matter.

If the project is approved, Wal-Mart looks to break ground in 2010, with construction taking about 18 months. It proposed the project in 2005.

Wal-Mart wants to build the 1.1 million-square-foot center on 230 acres between Childs and Gerard avenues in southeast Merced.

At capacity, more than 450 trucks would come and go each day. The facility would run all day and all night.

Reporter Scott Jason can be reached at (209) 385-2453 or sjason@mercedsun-star.com.