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Wal-Mart environmental report should rekindle debate on distribution center Merced expected to unveil the findings next month.

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The report detailing how the proposed Wal-Mart distribution center will change Merced's landscape will probably be released next month.

It will end more than three years of speculation about the proposed 1.2-million-square-foot warehouse's impact on the city. It will also formally launch the debate about whether it'll be a much-needed economic boost or an environmental nightmare.

Both sides, gearing up for the report's release, will use it to further their cause. They hope to persuade the City Council, which will decide the project's fate.

City planner Kim Espinosa said Tuesday that she's giving the report, an inch-and-a-half thick with double-sided pages, one more look before sending it back to EDAW, the firm writing it.

A release date should be set within the next week, she said. A year ago, the city hired an outside second company to review the report to make sure it's bullet-proof and can be defended in court. Wal-Mart is reimbursing the city for the second review.

An environmental report with omissions or mistakes can stall a project in court for months or years.

The study, required under state law, analyzes how the center will affect the environment, which includes air quality, traffic and water.

Wal-Mart plans to build the center on 230 acres between Childs and Gerard avenues. At capacity, more than 450 trucks will come and go each day.

The center, set to employ 600 people and run day and night, takes on added importance, given the recession and Merced's rising unemployment rate.

In 2005, when Wal-Mart proposed the warehouse, 10,000 residents, or 10 percent of the population, couldn't get a job.

Four years later, 14,500 people, or 13.3 percent of the county, can't find work.

"People need jobs," said Doug Fluetsch, chairman of the Merced County Jobs Coalition. "There's no other way around it. If we don't have people employed, crime increases, graffiti increases."

The coalition, which includes business leaders, was formed to support the distribution center. He said he's seen broad support for the project from e-mails and phone calls, which he expects to show at public meetings.

Besides hundreds of jobs, Fluetsch said the city's economic future is on the line. If the project is turned down he believes the community will get tagged as anti-growth and unwilling to change.

"It would be very difficult, if Wal-Mart doesn't succeed, for other businesses to succeed," he said. "Unfortunately, a lot is riding on this decision."

The opposition, meantime, is hoping the council will listen to the voices of residents who would live near the center and the ones who believe it will ruin the environment.

The Stop Wal-Mart Action Team, which has collected close to 4,000 signatures from people opposing the center, has been surveying residents in Southeast Merced about the project. Among other questions: whether they feel that city leaders listen to their concerns and take them seriously.

"They feel like their interests aren't being taken to heart," SWAT leader Nick Robinson said.

The survey is halfway done, with the group planning to talk with another 200 residents.

Once the environmental report is released, the group plans to present the survey results and tell people about how they can speak out about the center.

Some residents, regardless of their take on the project, feel as if the city's forcing the project on the community.

"It's not so much that (supporters) want a distribution center," Robinson said, "it's that they don't have any other options."

And so another chapter in the familiar economy vs. ecology debate opens next month. This time, the stakes are higher than ever.

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