

Merced County Times

City Council gives Wal-Mart the go-ahead

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Four years of debate, two weeks of public testimony and a thigh-high stack of plans and studies on the proposed Walmart distribution center were enough to make Councilman Bill Spriggs lean forward on Monday night and let them have it.

"How in good conscience can any of us sit up here in this economy and tell people they don't have the opportunity to apply for a job?" he asked the audience in the packed council chambers. "We have lost 1,321 employees in the last 18 to 24 months."

His voiced quivered with emotion as he sounded off the names of some 20 local businesses that have gone under or suffered mass layoffs: "Gottschalks ... County Bank ... Malibu Boats ... Mervyns ..."

And then he said something that made entranced Walmart supporters come alive with applause: "Our largest health problem isn't air quality or asthma. Our largest health problem is poverty. Our largest health problem is not having access to health care ... or not having jobs that provide health care coverage."

With that, other council members followed suit and steamrolled through their decision to allow Walmart to build its 1.2 million square foot distribution center in southeast Merced.

In the 6-1 vote, Mayor Ellie Wooten, Jim Sanders, Joe Cortez, Michele Gabriault-Acosta, Noah Lor and Spriggs voted in support. Only Mayor Pro Tem John Carlisle voted in opposition.

It was Carlisle who rambled through a set of questions directed at city planners, but he admitted early on that he could see "the writing on the wall," and it was clear the council would clear the project's environment impact report and general plan amendment.

Opponents, who claim the project will bring increased traffic and pollution to the region, now have to decide if they are going to file a lawsuit. Such an action could delay the project for several months or years, Walmart supporters say.

Before the council meeting, local business and chamber leaders called for the Merced Alliance for Responsible Growth and other Walmart opponents to back down from legal proceedings.

"No Walmart distribution center in California has ever been stopped due to litigation," said Dough Fluetsch of the Merced County Jobs Coalition, as he read a letter sent to MARG. "The only thing a frivolous lawsuit will achieve is delay and continued hardship for the unemployed and all of us."

Last week, the city council heard about six hours of public testimony on the project in two days of sessions. More than 60 residents spoke out during the meetings, with more than half in support of the project.

Tom Grave, a MARG chairman, said he thought the hearing process was fair, but he said some of the Walmart data was suspect.

"Walmart doesn't want to be pinned down," he said. "They stated the average wage, but averages can be misleading."

Walmart officials say the distribution center will create 900 full-time jobs with an average wage of \$17.50. They say the center will serve 49 existing stores when it opens and have the capacity to serve dozens more.

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