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Let comments flood in; Wal-Mart distribution center report is out Draft document outlines what the effects would be if the warehouse were built.

By SCOTT JASON
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A technical analysis about the proposed Wal-Mart distribution center isn't the best weekend reading, but some will be devouring it nonetheless.

Merced officials on Wednesday released the draft version of the report that chronicles how the proposed 1.1 million-square-foot warehouse will change the city's landscape if it's built.

By the end of the day, the city handed out 59 free CDs and sold seven printed copies of the report.

About three dozen business leaders sported buttons with "Jobs" written in large type surrounded by "Wal-Mart growing our economy."

A handful of the project's opponents showed up to grab copies of the report. Two police officers stood watch to make sure the release went peacefully.

City staff stressed that the presentation about the report's release wasn't a time to discuss opinions on the project. There was only one question asked: "When can we break ground?"

The short answer? Not for a while.

The city will take public comment for 60 days before all the letters go to the consultant firm that wrote the report. It must respond to every comment before releasing the final report.

No one knows how long that will take.

Then the city will hold public hearings about the project. Some will be before the Planning Commission before it heads to the City Council for the big vote to approve or deny the project.

For residents such as Vicki Ramirez, a member of the Merced County Jobs Coalition, nothing should hold up the center.

"Let me make it plain and simple: We need jobs in Merced County," she said. "I see people having trouble feeding their kids and keeping their homes."

Doug Fluetsch, chairman of the coalition, said the center's potential trumps all other issues -- even Merced's bad air days.

"The dialogue needs to happen. The discussion needs to happen, but there's no issue that can overshadow jobs," he said.

Tom Grave, with the Stop Wal-Mart Action Team, was the first person to buy a full printed copy of the report and the appendices, a \$90 purchase.

He plans to pore over the information in the coming weeks. "I expect it to be a thorough document and fully identify the impacts," he said.

The city and Wal-Mart have been working to make sure the report's bulletproof and that legal challenges can't hold up in court. It's this report that's sued.

While the law doesn't allow the project to be halted because of incomplete environmental reviews, it can stall progress.

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For copies of the report

People can get a copy of the Wal-Mart distribution center's environmental impact report on CD for free at City Hall. Printed copies cost \$45. The report's also available at www.cityofmerced.org

Printed copies can also be read at the Merced County Library's main branch, 2100 O St.

For the next 60 days, until April 27, people can comment on the report by sending an e-mail to espinosak@cityofmerced.org, by faxing it to (209) 725-8775 or by mailing Kim Espinosa, planning manager, City of Merced Planning Department, 678 W. 18th St., Merced, CA 95340. Residents must include their full name and address to become part of the public record.

