



Tuesday, Mar. 17, 2009

## **Merced City Council forges ahead on Wal-Mart distribution center City leaders vote 5-1 to keep April 28 deadline for public comment on the environmental impact report.**

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The public's time to comment on the proposed Wal-Mart distribution center will remain on schedule, a split Merced City Council decided Monday.

Elected leaders heard pleas from people who felt more needs to be done to keep the public informed and from others who believe the city shouldn't delay a project three years in the making that will employ up to 1,200 full-time workers.

"Please consider the city of Merced residents who need jobs and who need them as soon as possible," said Doug Fluetsch, distribution center supporter and chairman of the Merced County Jobs Coalition.

The City Council voted 5-1 to keep the April 28 deadline to field comments about the proposed Wal-Mart distribution center, a 1.1 million warehouse on 230 acres in southeast Merced.

Mayor Ellie Wooten, Councilmen Joe Cortez, Noah Lor and Bill Spriggs, and Councilwoman Michele Gabriault-Acosta voted to stay on the course the city set. Councilman Jim Sanders was absent. Mayor Pro Tem John Carlisle cast the dissenting vote.

Although the vote wasn't tied to whether the project will be approved or not, it lends some insight into which council members are skeptical of it and which ones feel comfortable with it being built.

Spriggs said he took the report on a recent flight and it helped him fall asleep. "It's pretty boring stuff," he said. "When you dig into the (environmental report) there are great sections on mitigation."

Two weeks ago, several residents told the council that 60 days wasn't long enough to read and understand the warehouse's 441-page environmental impact report and 675-page technical review, both released in late February.

The comment period is 15 days longer than the 45 days required by state law.

They also asked that it be translated to Hmong and Spanish and that informational meetings be held in the next month to discuss what's in the report.

None of the proposals gained any traction, though the city will work with Merced Lao Family Community and the Merced County Hispanic Chamber of Commerce to have translators at public hearings.

Carlisle wondered what the downside to a longer comment period would be, especially for a project with such high interest. "We'd be doing a disservice if we rush through what's been a three-year process," he said.

Resident Lisa Kayser-Grant said residents deserve to have their opinions heard on a complex report that took years to write and was reviewed by a third-party for a year.

"Time's been given to everyone but the public," she said.

Environmental lawyer Richard Harriman noted that he's not involved in the fight over the center, but said the city offering translators at public hearings and not having copies of the report in Spanish or Hmong could pose legal questions.

"It's simply not consistent," he said.

Cortez, before casting his vote, said that a translation would take too long and that the city needs to move on.

"(The economy) is going to get worse," Cortez said. "My job is to start thinking about jobs."

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