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## Environmental report on Wal-Mart's Merced center draws mostly support

By SCOTT JASON

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Merced's Civic Center has yet to be overwhelmed with criticisms and questions about the environmental report chronicling the proposed Wal-Mart distribution center's effects on the area.

Of course, the deadline is still a week away.

As of Thursday, the city had received letters from Caltrans, Madera County, the Central California Regional Water Quality Control Board and the Native American Heritage Commission.

An additional 50 letters in support or against the project have also been submitted, though they don't offer any specific criticism or pose questions.

Comments supporting the project outnumber ones against it by nearly a nine-to-one ratio. Most residents cite the need for jobs as a top reason for it to be built.

Wal-Mart has said it will hire 1,200 full-time workers by the time the 24-hour-a-day center is in full swing.

Though supporters have been more vocal so far, the Stop Wal-Mart Action Team at various public forums has continued to voice its concerns about the project's impact.

A group of opponents went before the San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District board Thursday to remind it of the 1.1 million-square-foot project's implications.

In a letter to the board, it noted that 72 tons of nitrogen oxides and 32 tons of particulate matter -- dust and soot -- will be created each year by the distribution center.

It asks that the district be vigilant in protecting the city's air.

If Wal-Mart's project is approved, it will have to pay a one-time fee for its pollution, District Director of Permit Services Dave Warner said.

The district charges \$9,350 for a ton of nitrogen oxide and \$9,011 for a ton of particulate matter.

The money collected goes into a fund that helps improve air quality by giving \$100 million in grants every year.

Top projects include upgrading truck fleets and replacing water pumps, Warner said.

The district will also comment on the draft report.

The number of comments affects how long it takes before the final report is issued.

In the case of Riverside Motorsports Park, the most controversial development in recent history, more than a thousand comment cards were sent to the county.

Hundreds of letters were mailed as well.

It took 10 months before the final report was released.

For the Wal-Mart project, 37 people have urged the city to approve the distribution center as quickly as possible.

Four people said they were against it being built. Another nine asked for more time to read the 441-page review, a request the city denied last month.

All comments on the project must be in by 5 p.m. April 27.

The third-party firm that wrote the draft environmental impact report must then respond to the critiques and make any changes to the report before issuing it in its final form.

The report, and essentially the project itself, then goes before the City Council for approval or denial.

If it's approved, Wal-Mart hopes to break ground in early 2010.

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### Comment

People can comment on the Wal-Mart distribution center report by sending an e-mail to [espinosak@cityofmerced.org](mailto: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.

The deadline is 5 p.m. April 27.