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Showdown on Wal-Mart distribution center near Final environment report should be in city's hands

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By the first Monday in July, Merced planning officials should have the final report that chronicles how the proposed Wal-Mart distribution center will change the city.

EDAW, the consultant writing the massive environmental review, is scheduled to turn over the final draft July 6 for city staff and attorneys to proofread.

It had offered a deadline of July 1, though it was revised Thursday.

After any changes are made, the project -- first proposed in 2005 -- will head to the Merced Planning Commission and City Council.

Wal-Mart plans to build a 1.1 million-square-foot distribution center on 230 acres between Childs and Gerard avenues. Supporters point to the added full-time jobs -- 600 when the center opens and 900 after a year of operation -- as a clear-cut reason why the project is essential for a community with an unemployment rate of 17 percent, representing about 18,000 people.

Opponents think the center's a bad idea, citing the added traffic on Highway 99 from big rigs and the poor air quality. (Wal-Mart has said its fleet will be green. Opponents worry that most of the trucks will be owned by outside contractors and not be clean-burning.)

The timeline for a vote on the controversial project remains tentative, though it could be as early as September, Merced Planning Manager Kim Espinosa said Wednesday.

The project must first go before the Planning Commission, which will offer a recommendation to the City Council.

Merced must publicly notice all meetings in advance. If Wal-Mart's project was to go before the commission Aug. 19, it'd have to be announced weeks ahead of time.

The center could then be before the council Sept. 21.

The draft environmental report, mandated by state law for large projects, was released in February for a 60-day public comment period. After about 300 letters of support, opposition and lingering questions, the report went back for revision.

EDAW, the consultant writing the report, is required to address all the questions raised by people. The public will be able to give their thoughts on the project during the public hearings before the commission and council.

Due to the amount of attention paid to the proposed Wal-Mart distribution center, the city's anticipating one council meeting to hear testimony and a second one the same week to vote.

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