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## Merced sets meetings to discuss Wal-Mart project

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The battle over the proposed Wal-Mart distribution center will begin Aug. 19.

Merced city officials have sent out public notices about the meeting, which will be the first step in approving or denying the 230-acre project in southeast Merced. The final draft of the environment report -- 1,500 pages of criticisms and responses in two volumes -- will be released Thursday for public review. CDs will be given away free. Printed copies cost \$145. A PDF version will be posted on the city Web site.

The timeline marks the beginning of the approval or denial process and the culmination of four years of planning. Wal-Mart proposed the project in 2005 and with the hope it would open much sooner than it has taken.

The plan is to build it on a swath of land between Childs and Gerard avenues.

Residents supporting and opposing the project will have the chance to sway the City Council to their side and decide the fate of the project.

The Planning Commission meeting will start at 6 p.m. in the council chambers at City Hall. Scores of people are expected to offer their thoughts on the project, so the city's setting aside multiple days to hear from the public.

The Aug. 19 hearing will probably be continued to Monday, Aug. 24 and, if even more time is needed, Aug. 26.

The first meeting will begin with a presentation from city staff members. Wal-Mart officials can then give a 15-minute speech on why the project should be supported. Opponents can have one person take 15 minutes to argue their case.

Each member of the public will also have three minutes to offer their input.

Once that's complete, the five-member Planning Commission will vote on whether it supports the project. That recommendation will then go to the City Council.

The council is tentatively scheduled to begin hearing from the public Sept. 21, a Monday. That meeting can be continued to 9 a.m. Sept. 26, a Saturday, and possibly the following Monday.

Merced Stop Wal-Mart Action Team co-chairman Kyle Stockard said the group was meeting Tuesday evening to discuss the upcoming hearings.

He believes EDAW, the consultant writing the report, rushed through responding to the 300 comments because the final draft is being released three months after the input period closed.

The firm began work on evaluating the project in June 2006. Its report, which went through a peer-review, was released in February after months of delays.

Still, Stockard said his group found issues with its review. "There were lots of questions and lots of problems they have not addressed," he said.

Aaron Rios, a Wal-Mart spokesman, said the company has been keeping its network of customers and supporters aware of the upcoming hearing and cited the Greater Merced Chamber of Commerce's survey of 300 voters that showed that 78 percent want the project approved. "It speaks for itself," Rios said.

(Opponents wondered whether the sample represented a cross-section of Merced and how the questions were phrased.)

Many Wal-Mart officials will be at the meeting to tout the project's benefits and answer questions.

Wal-Mart is familiar with trying to build projects in California, which has more levels of review than other areas, so the delays in Merced haven't dissuaded the company, Rios said.

"We're absolutely committed to moving forward through the approval process," he said.

The project is Merced's largest development under way. Wal-Mart said the center will create 900 full-time jobs by the time it's completely operational. Opponents tout the damage to the air and congestion on roads as two key reasons for why the project is not good for Merced. It's up to the City Council to decide.

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