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Wal-Mart sides sharpen their battle plans

City Planning Commission hearing today takes a look at proposal.

By SCOTT JASON

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A full-page color ad touting jobs, benefits and business.

A television ad decrying road congestion, pollution and noise.

A survey showing that 83 percent of Merced voters think the Wal-Mart distribution center should be built.

And mass e-mails sent to people across the city encouraging them to make their voices heard.

On the eve of the project's first public hearing, distribution center proponents and critics have intensified their effort to reach citizens who support their causes.

The Merced Planning Commission meets tonight to hear presentations about the Wal-Mart distribution center. Residents will each have three minutes to speak. With a strong turnout expected, the commission will probably continue its meeting to Monday so everyone can give their thoughts.

With the final vote on the horizon, each side says the other is distorting facts in an effort to mislead the public on what will be one of the most-watched City Council votes in some time.

The distribution center, proposed four years ago, represents the only development on the horizon and could give the local economy a needed boost during a brutal recession.

The center will cost about \$60 million to build. Wal-Mart will have to pay more than \$5 million to the city in construction fees.

Opponents worry that the trade-off will be irreversible damage to the environment and blight on what will eventually be the main road to UC Merced.

The 1.1 million-square-foot facility will be on 230 acres between Childs and Gerard Avenues. Campus Parkway will serve as the road the semi-trucks use to get in and out of the complex.

In the latest salvo, Wal-Mart released Tuesday a survey done by Voter/Consumer Research that shows that 26 percent of Merced voters think the city is headed in the right direction and 94 percent of people say there aren't enough jobs.

The Washington, D.C.-based firm polled 300 registered voters last week. The survey has a margin of error of 5.7 percent.

Kyle Stockard, with the Stop Wal-Mart Action Team, said he spoke with people who were surveyed and thinks the questions were worded in a way that tilted the results toward Wal-Mart. "You can get a survey that says anything you want," he said.

Stockard acknowledged more people favor the project than oppose it, though he maintains the margin is closer than it seems.

Wal-Mart's survey comes about a month after a 12-page newspaper was published by the Merced Alliance for Responsible Growth, or MARG. The publication, with headlines such as "Wal-Mart jobs threaten lives" and "Drinking water threat?" has been criticized as a scare tactic.

Des Johnston, with the Greater Merced Chamber of Commerce, during Monday's council meeting blasted the newspaper. He singled out an article that suggested the distribution center, if built, could be rife with prostitution, possibly involving students from Golden Valley High School.

The article cites "The Trucker," a magazine that had an article about prostitution stings, though none of the busts were at Wal-Mart facilities. "MARG is misleading our community and peddling fear," Johnston said.

Tom Grave, with MARG, stood by the publication and the prostitution story, saying that truck drivers are far from home and that such a problem should be considered. "It wasn't intended as an alarmist feature," he said.

The group this week debuted a television commercial that will run up until tonight's meeting. The narrator says the center will make children and the elderly sick, cause pollution and lower property values.

The spot was funded by donations to MARG. He wouldn't say who made the donations.

Grave said he thinks Wal-Mart is misleading the public when it advertises the 1,200 jobs set to be created by the center. Many of them, he suspects, won't go to Merced residents.

Wal-Mart officials have said they'll hire locally, but legally couldn't make any promises as to the percentage.

The distribution center will be running all day and all night. Early on, Wal-Mart first estimated that there would be 900 truck trips each day. A truck trip is a truck coming or going.

The company has since downplayed that estimate, calling it an unrealistic level of traffic. The lengthy environmental review forecasts about 643 trucks coming or going in a day. Roughly 40 percent of them will be Wal-Mart-owned diesel trucks. The rest will be from other companies.

The Planning Commission will give a recommendation to the Merced City Council, which will begin discussing the project Sept. 21.

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