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Jobs in forefront as Merced planners consider Wal-Mart distribution center

By SCOTT JASON

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A stream of residents, many wearing pins emblazoned with the word "Jobs," marched to the microphone Wednesday to urge the Merced Planning Commission to support the proposed Wal-Mart distribution center.

In a meeting that lasted five-and-a-half hours, more than 37 people spoke in support of the controversial project while 19 argued against it. About 300 residents packed into the second-floor council chambers at City Hall and into the Sam Pipes Room downstairs.

"We must look for ways to attract business and not turn them away," MERCOCredit Union CEO Mike Malone said. "Vote to approve the Wal-Mart distribution center. If not, will the last person in Merced please turn off the light?"

The seven-member commission didn't make a decision on whether to recommend approval to the City Council. The commission will meet again at 6 p.m. on Monday to continue the meeting. It will only hear from the 25 residents who signed up to speak but left before they were called.

The hearing is the first of the last few hurdles for a project that's been in the works for four years. The final vote by the City Council is on the horizon. If approved, it's likely that opponents will sue the city. Tom Lippe, a San Francisco attorney hired by Merced Alliance for Responsible Growth, criticized the environmental report, asserting that it fails to fully evaluate the impact of air pollution created by the diesel trucks that will drive up and down Highway 99. He called the project a Ponzi scheme. "The capital that's being wasted is people's health," Lippe said.

Wal-Mart's supporters pointed to Merced's 17 percent unemployment rate, low education level, dismal economy and general poverty as critical reasons for why the project must be built. Several said they were surprised Wal-Mart was patient enough to deal with all the legal obstacles to build the project.

Opponents, who wore stickers reading, "Protect our families: No to Wal-Mart," cited the added pollution to the air and water, and traffic congestion as concessions that aren't worth the added jobs. They also said approving the project would be a short-sighted decision in light of the growth and jobs UC Merced will continue to create.

Merced resident Sophia Curiel said she's not political or against Wal-Mart but worries about the health of the children at Pioneer Elementary School, which is near the distribution center site. Despite loving the area, she said she decided against living there because of the distribution center.

"I'm not against jobs. I have an unemployed son," she said. "I'm here for the people who have no voice."

The evening began with a presentation by Planning Manager Kim Espinosa, who detailed the project's basic outline and what will be done to reduce its impacts.

Wal-Mart wants to build a 1.1 million-square-foot distribution center on 230 acres in southeast Merced. After three years of operation, the center should employ up to 1,200 people. Nine hundred of those jobs will be full-time positions. The average full-time wage of people working at its other facilities is \$17.50.

City staff has recommended that the project be approved.

Kay Flanagan-Spinelli, a Merced real estate agent, said the project will help keep people's children from leaving the area in search of a job. "I don't want to see Merced dry up," she said.

Lee Boese Jr., a member of Citizens of the Betterment of Merced, toured Wal-Mart's Apple Valley distribution center and said he was impressed by its efficiency. No resident he spoke with said anything bad about it, Boese said.

He put on the overhead projector the front-page photo from Wednesday's Sun-Star that showed county employees reeling from the layoffs. Boese said he thinks people are against Wal-Mart as a company, not the project. "If you were going to substitute Microsoft for Wal-Mart, I don't think there'd be any opposition," he said.

John Harrell, who worked for Merced County's environmental health department, said he's disappointed that so many projects are felled by environmental regulations.

"In America, we're pulling ourselves down by our bootstraps," Harrell said. "We can't build anything -- refineries, plants. This is just a warehouse."

Ron Ewing said the center would be a boon for the otherwise struggling city. "Merced is similar to a homeless person. We just found a lottery ticket on the side of the road," he said. "Are we going to tear it up?"

Still other residents felt the project was too much of a gamble. Some wanted Wal-Mart to pledge to hire a certain percentage of



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SUN-STAR PHOTO BY BEA AHBECK Adam Lucio, of Merced, signs the list in support of Wal-Mart as Lupe Jimenez, also of Merced, puts on his pin as they arrive at City Hall for the Merced Planning Commission meeting Wednesday evening, Aug. 19, 2009. The Planning Commission began hearing arguments for the proposed distribution center.



local workers as a condition of the project getting approved. Most of the proponents spoke during the first half of the meeting. More opponents lined up to speak toward the end of the evening. People were allowed to speak in the order that they signed up.

Residents said approving the project was an easy decision, which Merced Sierra Club Chairman Rod Webster said was incorrect.

If it was a simple decision, Webster said, Wal-Mart wouldn't have needed to spend three years studying the effects. "Are the environmental effects trivial?" he asked the commission. "Wal-Mart didn't think so."

The members of the Planning Commission didn't offer their thoughts on the project. They argued over whether more people should be allowed to speak at Monday's meeting. They decided only the people who filled out request-to-comment cards but didn't go before the commission could speak at the coming meeting.

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