

MERCED COUNTY TIMES

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Thumbs up for Merced's Walmart plan

Planning commission recommends approval of distribution center

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The people have spoken and a commission has decided what Merced needs is more jobs and economic growth.

The project to bring a Walmart distribution center to the city won a major victory on Monday with the Merced Planning Commission unanimously recommending approval of the environmental report and a General Plan amendment.

Now it goes before the City Council, which will hold the first round of hearings on Sept. 21 at 6 p.m.

The two long sessions of planning commission talks brought hundreds of residents and passionate testimony to the Civic Center in what one commissioner called "a very smooth, organized and civil" dialogue.

Walmart officials were obviously pleased.

"I think Merced's citizens have spoken loudly during these hearings in saying they are in support of this project and want to see it get built as soon as possible," said Aaron Rios, a senior public affairs manager for Walmart.

His company plans to build the distribution center on 230 acres between Child and Gerard avenues. Some 900 full-time jobs are expected to be in place after three year's of operation.

Residents who are opposing the project say it will increase traffic and pollution that will contribute to health problems in the region. But the location of the center near Highway 99 and the new Campus Parkway road project proved very convincing for the commissioners.

"We were watching the trucks to see what kind of impact there was, and we kept looking around," said Mary Ward, a planning commissioner who traveled last spring with a group to a Walmart center in Porterville. "There really wasn't that much impact on traffic. It was normal, not even rush-hour traffic. The reality was different than what I had heard was the case."

Residents who oppose the plan decried Monday's decision and called some parts of the process unfair.

"We are sorry the commissioners are not more concerned with the health of the citizens," said Tom Grave, a supporter of the Stop Walmart Action Team and the Merced Alliance for Responsible Growth. "We don't think there was a good balance in the way the sides were presented. Of the first 29 speakers, only two people who opposed the project got a chance to speak. In the second group of 29, when many people started losing interest and were leaving, we had 16 or 17 people speak out against the project."

But Grave said the fight will continue in front of the City Council.

"We'll be back," he said.

There was some heated testimony during the planning commission hearings. Here are some excerpts from residents:

"I'm here for the children who have no voice. I love Pioneer School and I want to live in that area. I'm not going to run the risk of getting a disease or have any kind of health risk 30 years down the road. My concern is for the children of Pioneer School. These children are our future. I'm not willing to risk the life of one child."

— Sophia Curiel, second grade teacher at Pioneer School on Gerard Avenue, near the proposed site.

"I want Planada and Le Grand to have some of these jobs. I've seen enough guns and drugs in my life. Let's get our young people jobs. Those 1,000 jobs will support 3,000 because the workers will have spouses and children, and they will buy homes."

— Larry Gonzales.

"Read the Bible. Don't be selfish. You had your day, now let us have ours."

— Alan Cucio, in support of the the Walmart center.

"When we don't have good jobs in the community, good things in the community die. I don't want to see Merced dry up. If we don't get this project, it will go up somewhere else down the line of Highway 99."

— Kay Flanagan-Spinelli

"Which largest company in the world hasn't had problems? I think many of the people who oppose this project are good, honest people, but their argument is not legitimate."

— Jack Mobley

"The elected representatives are more interested in jobs for some people than health for everybody. The damaging health effects from this project are hidden in the documents."

— Thomas Libby, lawyer from San Francisco.