



Thursday, Sep. 17, 2009

## Merced City Hall showdown over Wal-Mart center looms

**Supporters, opponents to make final cases Merced City Council expects to make decision on Sept. 28.**

By SCOTT JASON  
[sjason@mercedsun-star.com](mailto:sjason@mercedsun-star.com)

The fate of the proposed Wal-Mart distribution center will soon be known.

The Merced City Council will hold four hearings in the coming week-and-a-half, culminating with a vote to approve or deny the project.

With crunch time approaching, both supporters and opponents have intensified their public relations campaigns.

The Merced/Mariposa County Asthma Coalition plans to send to 3,000 residents a letter outlining the air quality effects of the project. It notes that the county had 62 bad air days last year and that the center will be a quarter-mile from a public school.

Supporters have taken out newspaper ads to rally citizens. They also plan to march together to City Hall to show their commitment to bringing jobs to the county.

The distribution center last month won a unanimous nod from the Planning Commission, which touted the 600 full-time jobs it would create when it first opens. The center would grow to employ 900 full-time workers.

With those jobs come hundreds of diesel trucks that will come and go each day. The center will operate all day and all night.

The City Council will begin hearing a presentation from city staff Monday, as well as from Wal-Mart officials and opposition leaders.

Public comment will begin Wednesday and continue to Sept. 26, a Saturday. The council will likely cast its vote Sept. 28.

The project, while controversial, hasn't faced the fierce opposition generated by Riverside Motorsports Park, the last major project to polarize the community. (Though plans for Riverside Motorsports Park were approved in 2006, the project never broke ground. The project's leader has since said it will never be built.)

For instance, the Merced County Farm Bureau commented on the distribution center, but hasn't actively lobbied against it as it did during the motorsports park hearings.

The change in tenor may be attributed to at least two factors. One is that Merced's economy has changed considerably since 2006.

The unemployment rate has nearly doubled to 17.6 percent, and several major institutions have gone out of business.

The second factor is that the distribution center is slated for an area that's been zoned for industrial use for several years and near an existing distribution center.

Nevertheless, public turnout for the debate is expected to be large. The city has set aside the Sam Pipes Room at City Hall for overflow seating.

The hearings will also be broadcast live on Channel 96, except the Sept. 28 hearing, which will be on Channel 95.

*Reporter Scott Jason can be reached at (209) 385-2453 or [sjason@mercedsun-star.com](mailto:sjason@mercedsun-star.com).*