



Tuesday, Sep. 22, 2009

## Wal-Mart distribution center decision day approaching

**Both sides present arguments to City Council; public's chance to speak later this week.**

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The showdown on the proposed Wal-Mart distribution center began Monday with supporters and opponents showing up in force to sway the Merced City Council to their sides.

More than 100 residents packed City Hall for the first of four meetings about the controversial project.

Some Wal-Mart backers wore giant pins with the word "jobs" printed in large letters.

Opponents wore stickers that said, "Protect our families: No to Wal-Mart."

None was permitted to speak. As a result, the crowd began to dwindle by 9 p.m. and was almost gone a half-hour later.

The council heard only from Merced Planning Manager Kim Espinosa, Wal-Mart spokesman Aaron Rios and opposition attorney Keith Wagner.

Espinosa gave an overview of the project, its impact and its benefits. City staff and the Planning Commission have recommended its approval.

Rios touted Wal-Mart's commitment to green business practices and its focus on improving its truck fleet's efficiency. He noted that the average wage at a distribution center is \$17.50 an hour.

Wagner, a Sacramento attorney working for Merced Alliance for Responsible Growth, or MARG, called the environmental review "inadequate," asking the city to revise it and to hold off on voting on the project.

"The problem is many of the legal standards have not been followed," Wagner told the council.

Members of the public will have their chance to speak up 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. Wednesday and 9 a.m. to noon Saturday. The council is expected to vote on the project on Monday.

Each council member, except Mayor Ellie Wooten, asked Espinosa specific questions about the project, focused on sewer lines, drainage, traffic patterns and landscaping.

None of the elected officials indicated how they'd vote.

Mayor Pro Tem John Carlisle and Councilman Joe Cortez both supported having Wal-Mart build a dirt berm on the project's western edge.

"I think it's an important aspect," Carlisle noted. "It's designed to buffer, shield or hide the project from passersby on the Campus Parkway."

The council meeting began with the council's regular business before moving onto the hearing for Wal-Mart's project, a 1.1 million-square-foot distribution center on 230 acres between Childs and Gerard avenues.

Wal-Mart says it will employ 900 full-time workers and have 643 daily truck trips -- a tractor-trailer rig either coming or going. The center will be running all week at all hours.

If approved, Wal-Mart will pay more than \$4 million in impact fees.

The meeting included one outburst, related to MARG's appeal of the Planning Commission's vote on the project last month.

Opposition attorney Wagner stated his case about why the commission should have approved part of the plan not just recommend its approval. After taking his seat, Wagner interrupted Rios' rebuttal, saying that he wasn't addressing the appeal. Wooten told Wagner his time was up and asked him to be quiet.

City Attorney Greg Diaz said Rios needed to address the appeal. Rios showed an animated video of what a driver would see if they were on Campus Parkway and the center was built.

"It has nothing to do with the appeal," Wagner muttered from his seat.

Rios said the appeal was nothing but an attempt to stall the project. Wooten then continued the hearing to Wednesday, when members of the public will have a chance to speak about the distribution center.

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### Merced Sun-Star

SUN-STAR PHOTO BY BEA  
 AHBECK Aaron Velasquez, 18  
 months, of Merced, participates in  
 the protest against the proposed  
 Wal-Mart distribution center in  
 Merced, Calif. Monday, Sept. 21,  
 2009.

