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Wal-Mart distribution center: Fewer people attend special meeting ahead of Monday vote

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Merced's need for jobs took center stage Wednesday as residents debated whether allowing a Wal-Mart distribution center to be built would be the wisest way to boost the area's fledgling economy.

The City Council is faced with approving or denying a 1.2-million-square-foot distribution center Wal-Mart wants to build in the southeast part of the city.

Supporters say the choice should be clear. They point to the county's unemployment rate of nearly 20 percent and Wal-Mart's pledge to create 1,200 jobs, 900 of which will be full-time.

"Wal-Mart jobs are the perfect stepping stone for our residents to improve their lives," Atwater resident Steve Ewing told the council.

Opponents remain skeptical about how many of the jobs will be given to local residents as people from all over the Valley may try to secure positions at the center. They note the environmental review shows there will be unavoidable impacts to the air quality and believe the company's trucks will clog up the roads.

Kyle Stockard, co-chair of the Stop Wal-Mart Action Team, said the distribution center will also lead to more supercenters "filled with junk made in China."

"Everything's Wal-Mart all the time," he said, quoting a Merle Haggard song. "No more mom and pop. No more five and dime."

About 150 people turned out for the meeting, though the crowd thinned slightly around 9 p.m. The turnout was less than what many people were anticipating. The city had two overflow areas set aside in case there were scores of people.

Forces against Wal-Mart dominated the beginning of three-hour meeting, which was dedicated to hearing from the public. Only project opponents spoke during the first hour. The rest of the meeting was a mix, though there were more supporters.

Fifteen people spoke in favor of the distribution center. Seventeen people spoke against the distribution center. Four of them were from outside Merced County.

The long line of opponents who turned in their request-to-speak-cards on Monday seemed to be in response to the hearing before the Planning Commission, when proponents commanded the first half of the meeting and opponents spoke later in the evening as people grew tired.

The seven-member council remained quiet and listened. They'll deliberate on the project Monday and likely cast the deciding vote. Opponents have already made it clear they'll file a lawsuit if the center moves forward.

The threats were troubling for local Wal-Mart worker Linda Lee-Peoples, who praised her jobs benefits and wants more people to gain employment.

"Merced needs a face-lift," she said. "You know what a face-lift does? It makes you look a whole lot better."

She was disappointed that opponents haven't offered any tangible alternatives. "What are you bringing to the table?" she asked. "Nothing but a lot of words."

John Grant said the council must think about the city's grandchildren, who will be harmed by more air pollution. He said 16 percent of Valley children have asthma. He lamented commerce taking precedence over the environment.

"This is not an economic issue," he said. "It's a moral issue. It's an ethical issue."

More residents will have a chance to speak from 9 a.m. to noon Saturday. The meeting will continue into the afternoon if everyone hasn't had a chance to address the council.

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