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Wal-Mart launches campaign to win over Mercedians

Company hopes to dispel myths about impact; opposition to project continues to mount.

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Audio: Reporter Leslie Albrecht talks about Wal-Mart's new Web site for the Merced distribution center

After two-and-a-half years of near silence, Wal-Mart has come out swinging. The megaretailer launched a Web site last week devoted to convincing Merced residents that building a distribution center here will create hundreds of well-paying jobs and bolster a flagging economy.

The online campaign -- www.mercedcan.com -- marks Wal-Mart's most public move yet in the PR battle over plans to build a distribution center in southeast Merced, which Wal-Mart first announced in 2005. The City Council is expected to vote on the project later this year after an environmental impact report is released in April.

Spokesman Aaron Rios said Wal-Mart created the site to combat falsehoods that have been circulating about the proposed distribution center. "We just want to make sure we answer all the questions that have arisen out of all this misinformation that is out there," said Rios. "We're going to do our part to make sure that the true and accurate information gets out there."

Rios said Wal-Mart wants to communicate two key points:

how the 1.2 million-square-foot distribution center will affect the environment;

and what it will mean for Merced's economy.

Opponents have said the hundreds of diesel trucks driving in and out of the distribution center every day will worsen Merced's already poor air quality. Wal-Mart's new Web site counters that claim with information about the company's new "green fleet," diesel trucks that use auxiliary power units so they don't have to sit idling with their engines running.

The site also includes new information on the jobs the distribution center is projected to create. Previous reports had put the number of jobs at the distribution center at 600 during the center's first year of operation and up to 900 after three years. Now Wal-Mart says the project will create 1,000 jobs in its first year, 600 of which will be full-time. The site lists the average wage for distribution center jobs at \$16.50 an hour.

Information dissemination isn't the site's only goal. It also encourages supporters to take action by signing a mailing list, writing letters to the editor or contacting City Council members. Rios said he didn't know yet how many people have added their names to the list of supporters.

When Wal-Mart first announced its distribution center plans in 2005, said Rios, the company mailed out literature on the project to Merced residents. The mailer included a response card that supporters and job seekers could send back to Wal-Mart. The company collected 5,000 responses, Rios said.

Wal-Mart promoted its new site with a full-page ad in last Friday's print edition of the Sun-Star and an ad on the Sun-Star's Web site.

Since Wal-Mart announced its plans in 2005, opponents of the distribution center project have mounted an increasingly vocal campaign to stop the project, which is slated for a 230-acre parcel between Childs and Gerard avenues west of Tower Road.

A group called the Stop Wal-Mart Action Team regularly speaks at City Council meetings, sends out press releases and hosts public forums. The group has also produced two videos about the negative impacts they say the distribution center will create.

Interest in the proposed distribution center is so high that the city published a fact sheet on the project in 2006, based on information supplied by Wal-Mart. City spokesman Mike Conway said he doesn't see curiosity about the distribution center tapering off anytime soon.

"With the national economy being shaky and the local economy reflecting some of those concerns, people are wondering about job growth and what impacts it might have," said Conway. "There are other people concerned about the environmental impacts. So I think we've got a growing interest level on the project from a variety of sides."

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