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Willows Wal-Mart superstore gets green light

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WILLOWS -- If anyone was surprised, it didn't show through the applause Tuesday night by about 90 citizens crowding Willows City Hall.

The City Council's unanimously approved three resolutions to allow Wal-Mart to build a superstore behind the existing store.

Echoing last month's Planning Commission meeting, public comments Tuesday resoundingly supported the superstore. Among the 25 people who addressed the council, only two spoke against approving the project.

Alan Schauer still wanted voters to decide.

"It would require only 250 signatures to put the Wal-Mart issue on the ballot before the voters," Schauer said.

Brian Wilber noted that nobody spoke against the superstore at the Planning Commission session.

"I know there are many against Wal-Mart coming," Wilber said. "I was one."

Support came from citizens of Willows and Orland, and employees once again sang Wal-Mart's praises.

Citizens spoke of the benefit the store will bring to Willows: an estimated 300 jobs and \$450,000 to the economy.

Some talked about the store as a new beginning for the city. One speaker asked the council to approve the store to draw travelers along Interstate 5 — and lure new businesses — before other cities do.

"If we don't get it, someone else on the corridor will," said Randy Magar. "If we don't do it, we'll lose."

Some talked about how the store will allow people to do their shopping in town instead of driving to Chico or other places. And some said local stores don't have to go out of business.

"A Wal-Mart superstore will not hurt Willows," said Ron Alveston. "It will only hurt those unwilling to help themselves improve their businesses."

One city councilor said an issue she'd heard arise before the meeting was the issue of fairness.

"Has Wal-Mart been treated fair? I hope so. Have businesses in town been treated fair? I hope so," Terry Taylor-Vodden said.

She said she didn't think the project divided people as much as she thought, and acknowledged people who are against the store but who didn't speak out.

"We're sympathetic to their concerns," she said.

Councilor Rosemarie Thrailkill said one of her main concerns with the store is its impact on local businesses, specifically referring to Wal-Mart's agreement to contribute \$60,000 toward the city's downtown revitalization and place a billboard inside the store that will advertise local businesses.

Although the \$60,000 was worded in its agreement to be given to the city in collaboration with Tri-County Economic Development Corp., it was amended to say "in consultation."

The City Council will direct how that money is spent.

Mayor Mike Murray, like Councilor Vince Holvik, was a member 13 years ago when the city approved the first Wal-Mart.

"It boils down to the greatest good for the greatest number," Murray told the audience. "We work for all you folks, so you tell us what to do ..." he said, adding that their presence indicated they want the store.

Voting on separate resolutions, the council approved the certified environmental impact report, lot line adjustments to include pads for a fuel station and fast-food restaurant, and a use permit and design review, with amendments.

Representing the engineering firm hired by Wal-Mart, Todd Anderson said after the meeting that once final plans are drawn and the company gets approval from Caltrans for road and signal-light improvements, construction could begin in August or September.

The store may be completed by July 2007.

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