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Wal-Mart rep addresses public concerns at Rotary meeting

by James Leonard | Patterson Irrigator
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Wal-Mart representative Marko Mlikotin speaks to members of the Patterson Rotary Club during a meeting last week. Elias Funez/Patterson Irrigator

Wal-Mart is likely close to two years away from coming to Patterson even if it skates through the city approval process, but its public relations push continued at full speed last week when a company representative spoke at a Patterson Rotary Club meeting.

Marko Mlikotin — president of River City Communications, a public relations firm hired by Wal-Mart — spoke for a few minutes and answered several pointed questions from Rotary members on Wednesday, May 20. The

topics addressed ranged from the store's pricing to its employment and hiring practices.

Mlikotin began by showing artists renderings of what the proposed 158,000-square-foot supercenter on the southwest corner of Ward and Sperry avenues would look like.

In his opening remarks, Mlikotin emphasized Wal-Mart's commitment to advancing green technology and being energy efficient, rebuffed concerns about the retail giant's treatment of its employees — 95 percent have health care, he said — and cited company-sponsored studies that have shown communities typically benefit economically when Wal-Mart comes to town.

Mlikotin also spoke to Wal-Mart's new philosophy on community relations. Wal-Mart has found, Mlikotin said, that public resistance to new stores generally subsides when the company is more active in promoting a positive image of itself.

“The more the public knows about the process, and the more they hear from us, the more comfortable they are about Wal-Mart,” he said.

Among the highlights from the question-and-answer portion of the lunchtime meeting:

- Mlikotin said there are no plans for the Patterson Wal-Mart to include tire or auto repair departments.
- In response to a question about inconsistencies in pricing between Wal-Mart stores in Stockton and Modesto, Mlikotin said that while fluctuations do occur from store to store, “I think you'll be very pleased with the prices” when it comes to Wal-Mart and its competitors.

- Asked if there could be any way of ensuring that Patterson residents are hired at the Patterson store, Mlikotin said the company cannot legally discriminate against out-of-town people but that it's only natural for local people to wind up working at a local store.
- Mlikotin said that Wal-Mart is planning on purchasing the land if the project is ultimately approved.
- Regarding the approval process, Mlikotin said the first step will be an environmental impact review, which will include an analysis of the economic impact the store would have on local businesses. Including a public review period and time to implement public concerns, plus the subsequent city approvals of the EIR, he estimated it would be a little more than a year before construction could begin. The construction itself would take around 10 months, he said.
- Another member asked how Patterson could support a Wal-Mart when smaller stores like Target have resisted coming here because the population is too small. Mlikotin said the company looks not just at Patterson's population but also at neighboring towns that would likely also contribute to its business.

“Wal-Mart would not make such a large investment here unless it thought it would work,” he said.

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