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## Survey: Merced voters would approve Wal-Mart warehouse

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Supporters of the proposed Wal-Mart distribution center say a new survey shows most Merced voters favor building the warehouse complex -- but Wal-Mart opponents are calling the poll slanted.

A survey firm hired by the Greater Merced Chamber of Commerce conducted the poll of 300 registered voters in the city of Merced.

It found that 81 percent of city voters support the proposed distribution center, which Wal-Mart plans to build in southeast Merced between Childs and Gerard avenues, west of Tower Road.

Other findings include:

78 percent of voters believe the City Council should approve the Wal-Mart distribution center.

64 percent of voters strongly support the distribution center.

14 percent strongly oppose the distribution center.

The poll was conducted over the phone from May 7 to May 8. The survey carries a 5.7 percent margin of error. Wal-Mart paid for the poll, which was conducted by Washington, D.C.-based Voter Consumer Research. It cost just under \$8,300, said Wal-Mart spokesman Aaron Rios.

There are currently 29,210 registered voters in the city, according to the county elections department.

Rios said the poll was conducted to counter criticism of the Wal-Mart distribution center by groups such as the Stop Wal-Mart Action Team and Merced Alliance for Responsible Growth.

Those groups have hosted public forums, testified at City Council meetings and produced videos charging that trucks servicing the 1.2 million-square-foot complex will harm Merced's air already poor quality. Proponents say the distribution center will eventually provide 900 full-time jobs.

"For well over a year Merced residents and elected officials had only heard from our opposition, but the reality is we enjoy tremendous support and favorability for this project, and I think the poll by the chamber only reflects that more," said Rios.

Experts say a poll of 300 voters is enough to paint a broad brush picture of how Merced voters feel. But the accuracy of the poll depends on what the questions are and how they're asked.

Who the pollsters talked to is also an important factor, said Ted Hilliard, a campaign consultant who regularly conducts such surveys.

To achieve the most accuracy, a poll, said Hilliard, a poll should ask questions from a cross-section of voters that reflects Merced's demographics.

"You test the age, sex, and demographics against what you know to be the population of that electorate," said Hilliard. "Different (political) parties, different sexes, different ages are going to have differences in how they vote."

Registered voters tend to be older, wealthy and educated, according to a 2006 study by the Public Policy Institute of California. For the Wal-Mart poll, 80 percent of those surveyed said they were white, 28 percent said their total family income was \$75,000 or more.

Nick Robinson, an organizer with the Stop Wal-Mart Action Team, said he was skeptical of the poll's results.

"What they don't talk about in their press release is how the questions were asked," said Robinson. "If you talk about the options and alternatives and the full impacts to human health and the environment and our ability to breathe and a decent life in Merced and give people a real understanding of the project you don't get the same results. In fact, you get quite the opposite."

Robinson said his group has collected 3,500 to 4,000 petition signatures opposing the Wal-Mart distribution center.

Since January, Wal-Mart has worked to gather supporters for the distribution center. Proponents can register their support through a Web site or by filling out a card at the Wal-Mart store in Merced. So far, about 9,000 people say they endorse the project, said Rios.

Wal-Mart first announced plans to build a distribution center in Merced in 2005. The City Council won't vote on the project until after an environmental impact report is released. That report is slated for release in August or September, said city Planning Manager Kim Espinosa.

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### Sample questions from the Wal-Mart survey:

**If your City Council member voted to approve the Wal-Mart Distribution Center, are you more likely to support or oppose the City Council member in the next election?**

**Thinking about the issue of growth and development in Merced, do you believe the rate of growth is too high, too low, or just about right?**

**Are you or is anyone in your household a member of a labor union or a teacher's association?**

To view the entire survey and a PowerPoint presentation on the survey's results, go to [www.mercedsunstar.com](http://www.mercedsunstar.com).

 [Read the Wal-Mart survey](#)

<http://www.mercedstopwalmart.org>

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