



Tuesday, Sep. 29, 2009

Merced City Council approves Wal-Mart distribution center

The vote was 6-1 in favor of the center.

By SCOTT JASON

Capping four years of debate, six hours of public input and dozens of technical studies, the Merced City Council voted Monday to let Wal-Mart build a massive distribution center.

Five council members -- Jim Sanders, Joe Cortez, Michele Gabriault-Acosta, Noah Lor, Bill Spriggs -- and Mayor Ellie Wooten voted in support. Mayor Pro Tem John Carlisle voted in opposition.

"Our largest health issue isn't air quality or asthma," Spriggs said, his voice growing thick with emotion. "Our largest health problem is poverty."

Several audience members in the packed council chambers applauded after the vote.

Carl Pollard shouted, "Yes -- hallelujah!"

The turnout wasn't as large as predicted. The council chambers were barely full and the overflow areas were empty. Supporters outnumbered opponents by a 2-1 margin.

The vote laid to rest the council's role in a project that, depending on who's speaking, will either begin Merced's economic recovery or lead to the environmental ruin of southeast Merced.

Wal-Mart proposed in 2005 building a 1.2 million square foot distribution center that will serve 49 existing stores when it opens and have the capacity to serve dozens more. It pledges to create 900 full-time jobs with an average wage of \$17.50.

Supporters see this as a clear reason the project is crucial to improving Merced's economic health.

Opponents charge that Wal-Mart's trucks along with ones from the third-party firms it works with will make Merced's bad air worse and clog up the roads. They question the wage and job figures.

Carlisle said it was clear the project would be approved and hoped his vote would remind Wal-Mart to keep its promises and know not everyone supported its center. He complained there was wiggle room in what Wal-Mart has to do to offset the project's impacts.

"It concerns me considerably," he noted.



Tom Grave, Merced Alliance for Responsible Growth chairman, left, talks with Aaron Rios, spokesman for Wal-Mart, during a break at the Merced City Council's special meeting regarding the Wal-Mart distribution center.



Chambers letter to MARG

Spriggs totaled the number of jobs lost in the past two years: 1,321.

"How in good conscience can any of us sit up here in this economy and tell people they don't have the opportunity to apply for a job?" he asked.

With the project approved, the focus shifts to whether opponents will file a lawsuit to delay the project.

Officials with the three chambers of commerce, the Merced Boosters and the Merced County Jobs Coalition held a news conference before the meeting to ask Wal-Mart opponent Merced Alliance for Responsible Growth to keep the project out of the court system.

"By doing the right thing, you will ensure MARG's legacy and place in our community as an organization that advocates responsible planning and not one that was persuaded by out of town interest groups determined to defy popular public opinion and deny our community hope for a more prosperous future," Merced County Jobs Coalition President Doug Fluetsch said, reading from a letter sent to MARG.

MARG chairman Tom Grave hadn't seen the letter until contacted by the Sun-Star in the afternoon.

"They're doing their job and it's a nice letter," Grave said, "but we're not going to back down."

After the meeting MARG co-chairman Kyle Stockard said the group would meet with its attorneys next week and decide whether to pursue legal challenges.

He remained skeptical about the project's touted benefits.

"This (center) will never be what they promised," he said. "I don't think it will be the salvation."

Wal-Mart spokesman Aaron Rios said he was pleased with the council's decision.

"We're committed to bringing quality jobs to Merced," Rios said.

Without any legal challenges construction could begin as soon as 90 days. Much depends on how quickly city staff processes the paperwork.

Supporters worry a legal challenge could delay the project by as much as two years.

Wal-Mart said 600 construction workers will be needed to build the complex, which will be on 230 acres between Childs and Gerard avenues. Construction is estimated to last about 18 months.

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