



Coalition to ask voters to stop Wal-Mart

Ballot initiative aims to limit the size of grocery stores

By Kevin Clerici ([Contact](#))
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Dissatisfied with city efforts, opponents of Wal-Mart decided Wednesday to put their cause in voters' hands.

A coalition of citizens and grocery unions filed a ballot initiative aimed at keeping the world's largest retailer from opening a store in Ventura by banning any grocery store larger than 90,000 square feet.

Using as a backdrop a shuttered Kmart store on Victoria Avenue that Wal-Mart wants to replace, some 50 people cheered and waved handmade signs during the scripted announcement.

"It's our city. It's our choice," said Ed Lacey, a local attorney and spokesman for Livable Ventura, one of half a dozen citizen and grocery union groups backing the measure. "The voice of the people is going to decide this issue."

Supporters want to qualify the measure for the Nov. 4 election — a Herculean task considering they expect to have about 11 weeks to collect the 8,903 verified signatures, or 15 percent of local registered voters, needed for a special election.

The signatures would have to be filed by May 16 to make the November ballot, Ventura City Clerk Mabi Plisky said.

Supporters would need 5,936 signatures, or 10 percent of registered voters, to qualify for the next regular city election in November 2009, she said.

Volunteers will be leaned on heavily to collect signatures and will go door to door in neighborhoods to drum up support. If that doesn't work, supporters may turn to paying signature gatherers to get the job completed. "We have not ruled it out," Lacey said in an interview.

Lacey declined to say how much money the coalition has raised. "We are confident we could raise whatever money is needed," he said.

Not all big-box outlets covered

Supporters cast Wal-Mart as a "behemoth" with "lousy ethics," and worry one of its popular discount stores would hurt local businesses, add low-wage jobs in a community without affordable housing, worsen traffic and alter Ventura's reputation as a quaint beach town.

The initiative specifically targets large grocery stores, and not all big-box outlets. "It doesn't ban a Target, or a Best Buy or J.C. Penney," said Jim Alger, a grocery workers union advocate and veteran of several anti-Wal-Mart campaigns around the state. Alger said Venturans supported grocery workers during recent strikes and the well-financed union is returning the favor.

Coalition members include the Tri-Counties Labor Foundation, United Food and Commercial Workers, as well as the Stop Ventura Wal-Mart Coalition, Livable Ventura, a regional policy think-tank CAUSE and the Ventura County Working Peoples Alliance.

The Ventura City Council voted this month to limit the size of multistory stores at the Kmart site and along Victoria Avenue to 100,000 square feet, despite pleas by the coalition to lower the number to 90,000 square feet.

Measure would define superstore'

The proposed initiative would redefine a "superstore" as any structure greater than 90,000 square feet that devotes more than 3 percent of the sales floor to nontaxable grocery items. Companies wanting to use vacant big-box stores such as the Kmart also could face greater scrutiny and possible conditions, if it's proven the new store would pay low wages, increase demand for affordable housing, add traffic and negatively affect other businesses.

Wal-Mart has not filed a formal application to replace the Kmart building, which it controls, but presented a concept plan to build a 150,000-square-foot store when it last met with city leaders.

"We're disappointed in their decision to pursue further ways to keep us out of the community," Wal-Mart spokesman Aaron Rios said, adding the company's three other stores in the county — a Wal-Mart and Sam's Club in Oxnard and a Wal-Mart in Simi Valley — had more than 4 million visitors last year and generated some \$1.8 million in sales taxes revenues for those communities.

The Kmart site is best suited for an office complex for good-paying jobs, said Jonell McLain of Ventura, a local real estate broker.

Vacant store preferred

"If it's between a vacant store and Wal-Mart, vacant is good with me," Ventura resident and coalition volunteer Patti Channer said. "I don't like Wal-Mart. I don't like what they have done to other towns."

Lou Liddi, 74, a retired educator, attended the event and plans to go door to door to collect signatures in his east Ventura neighborhood. "It's going to be up to us, the citizens, to decide what's best for our community," he said.

<http://www.venturacountystar.com/news/2008/jan/31/coalition-to-ask-voters-to-stop-wal-mart/>