



# Wal-Mart welcomed, but no superstore on Victoria, council decides

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**A standing-room-only crowd on Monday urged the Ventura City Council to adopt rules to help prevent Wal-Mart from opening a store on Victoria Avenue, but got only part of what they wanted.**

The council held firm on a provision that no retail store along Victoria Avenue be greater than 100,000 square feet in size. But in a 5-2 vote coming just before midnight, the council agreed to allow existing stores along the busy corridor to be “modernized,” including the addition of loading docks, new entrances and other improvements aimed to make the building more environmentally friendly.

Proponents said the changes will allow property owners to keep their buildings occupied in the short-term until the economy recovers, but skeptics contend it will make it easier for Wal-Mart to take over a shuttered Kmart.

The rules were adopted late Monday as part of the Victoria Avenue Corridor Plan, a 20-year growth blueprint aimed at revitalizing the busy thoroughfare with more pedestrian-friendly areas and office space to encourage high-wage jobs.

Although the growth plan affects the entire corridor, a majority of Monday’s speakers focused on the Kmart store and their opposition to a Wal-Mart moving in, citing concerns over traffic, parking, the company’s business practices and competition to small local businesses.

The world’s largest retailer in February submitted to plans to open a 130,000 square-foot, likely with groceries, by remodeling a string of adjacent vacant buildings on Victoria Avenue, including Kmart.

That proposal would not be allowed under the development codes adopted Monday, however, because it calls for several interior walls to be torn down and would surpass the 100,000 square-foot threshold, city planners said.

Wal-Mart could move into the 84,000-square-foot Kmart, but make only the limited modifications adopted Monday, city planners said.

Members of Livable Ventura, a citizens group that is part of the Stop Wal-Mart Ventura Coalition, contend the council’s suggested changes were added to assist Wal-Mart. There are no other building applications in the pipeline along the Victoria corridor.

“Loading docks are only needed for high-volume stores,” said Livable Ventura’s Nan Waltman. “That means big trucks, more often.”

The coalition, which includes grocery employee unions, has put a measure on the November ballot to prohibit any new Ventura store selling groceries that is larger than 90,000 square feet.

Most Ventura residents opposed the late changes in the plan, which has been in the works for more than two years. It calls for the elimination of “auto-oriented, big-box” stores along Victoria. Those stores could go elsewhere, such as behind the Ventura Auto Center. Instead, the corridor plan encourages smaller retail stores, wide and landscaped walkways, diagonal parking and protected bus stops.

No one from Wal-Mart spoke, though some residents said they would appreciate the store’s low prices and felt the city would benefit from likely increased sales taxes.

After much deliberation, Mayor Christy Weir and councilmen Jim Monahan, Neal Andrews, Carl Morehouse and Ed Summers voted in favor of the late changes allowing modifications, with Bill Fulton and Brian Brennan opposed.

Fulton said the late amendment will erode the plan’s goal of improving the quality of design along the busy corridor.

Instead, it’s going “to allow one of the richest corporations in the world to move into a crappy building with minimal improvements,” he said. “This is not raising the bar.”



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