

# Wal-Mart initiative signatures submitted

## Issue would go on November 2009 ballot; store could open before then

By Kevin Clerici  
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Ventura voters will likely decide whether Wal-Mart should be allowed in town — if the world's largest retailer doesn't open shop before voters get a chance to weigh in.

The Stop Wal-Mart Ventura Coalition on Thursday submitted nearly 13,000 signatures supporting the addition of an initiative to the ballot aimed at blocking Wal-Mart or any large grocery store from opening within city boundaries.

The group needs 5,936 valid signatures, or 10 percent of registered voters, to earn a spot on the November 2009 ballot. The county Elections Division has 30 working days to verify the signatures.

A more costly special election will be required if roughly 8,900 signatures are found valid, but the coalition doesn't believe it has that many, because people who sign petitions often are not registered to vote or don't live within city limits.

The initiative would ban any new store larger than 90,000 square feet that sells groceries. Big grocers also could face special conditions if they want to move into an existing vacant store. The measure also forbids "piece-mealing" — moving into an existing store and then expanding.

"The sheer number of signatures should make it clear to the city and to Wal-Mart itself that Venturans don't want Wal-Mart here," said coalition member Nan Waltman, chairwoman of the citizens group Livable Ventura.

Wal-Mart controls the shuttered Kmart store on Victoria Avenue, and coalition members say it's likely the retailer will make a move before voters have their say at the ballot box.

They say the city could go a long way toward preserving voters' rights by requiring Wal-Mart to abide by the initiative if it tries to open before November 2009 and the measure later passes.

"We call on the City Council to formally clarify to the company that they will be held to this new law, if the people of Ventura pass it," said Das Williams, a legislative analyst for the Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy.

Wal-Mart would have to get city approval to demolish the Kmart store and rebuild, the company's preference. But it would be virtually impossible to stop Wal-Mart from moving into the Kmart store if the retailer chooses not to make major physical changes to the building, said Nelson Hernandez, Ventura's development director.

Wal-Mart has not formally applied to do anything with the store but outlined plans for a 150,000-square-foot grocery store in meetings with city officials last year. Since then, "we haven't heard a peep from them," Hernandez said.

Wal-Mart, however, recently mailed letters to Ventura residents seeking input on the possibility of a Wal-Mart Supercenter at the Kmart location.

Aaron Rios, a Wal-Mart spokesman whose name was on the letters, could not be reached for comment.

The initiative's authors cast Wal-Mart as a "behemoth" with "predatory practices" and worry that it 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.

Critics of the measure blocking Wal-Mart point to the potential windfall of sales tax revenue from a Wal-Mart store and the potential chilling effect the initiative could have on attracting other businesses. 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 \$1.8 million in sales tax revenues for those communities.

The initiative specifically targets large grocery stores but not all big-box outlets. It would not ban a large electronics store like Fry's or Best Buy, or a department store.

The coalition supporting the measure includes the Tri-Counties Labor Foundation, United Food and Commercial Workers union, Stop Ventura Wal-Mart Coalition, Livable Ventura and the Ventura County Working People's Alliance.



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