



WAL*MARTWATCH

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the Battlemart Blog



Ventura, CA. City Manager Calls Wal-Mart A “Black Hole” To Local Businesses

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WE DON'T NEED WAL-MART



On July 31, 2007, Sprawl-Busters reported that Wal-Mart had signed a lease on an existing K-Mart location in Ventura, California. Wal-Mart began talking with city planners two years ago about demolishing the Kmart store on Victoria Avenue and replacing it a 150,000 s.f. superstore with grass and a fountain in front, with an underground parking lot. In March, 2007, the City Council in Ventura adopted a 20-year “smart growth” plan for a seven-block area along Victoria Avenue that calls for more offices and pedestrian-friendly development. The council passed an “urgency” ordinance on Victoria Avenue that requires a building greater than 50,000 s.f. to undergo a special review and a use permit. City planners said that Wal-Mart appeared to be willing to meet the city’s new development guidelines, which would force the retailer to reduce the size of its store to a 60,000 s.f. maximum, and build it on two stories. The citizen’s group Livable Ventura has been pressing the city to pass an ordinance controlling big-box development. A telephone poll of 300 voters in July found that 62% of Ventura residents oppose Wal-Mart opening a store along the busy Victoria Avenue corridor. Nearly 75% support strengthening the rules on where big-big retailers could locate in the city. This week, members of the Stop Wal-Mart Coalition gathered to discuss strategy for sinking the Wal-Mart plan. The Wal-Mart controversy is coming just as the city heads into a city council election on November 6th, so the issue has become even more politicized than ever. “We feel we have received good cooperation from the

city in the past, but the answer we're hearing is, 'We'd love to stop Wal-Mart, but we can't,' " a staff person for Livable Ventura told the Ventura County Reporter. "We want to make it clear to the city that Ventura as a whole doesn't just want Wal-Mart stopped but it demands they do something about stopping Wal-Mart, and there are legal tools in place to stop further big box development in the Victoria corridor."

Ventura City Manager Rick Cole noted that Wal-Mart has shown the city preliminary design plans, but has not filed a formal application. Cole told the Reporter that Wal-Mart would increase traffic, create low-wage jobs, and take up space that could be used to meet Ventura's housing demands. He said the city could demand Wal-Mart provide housing for its employees, "at the very least." Cole described Wal-Mart as a "black hole to Ventura business" that would end up driving out many locally owned stores. Cole said Wal-Mart is committed to constructing a "green" store---which has nothing to do with scale or appropriateness. As Livable Ventura noted, a 'green' store can mean as little as "decent insulation and bike racks." "We're not looking to discriminate for or against Wal-Mart," Cole told the newspaper. "We're trying to get whatever is built there to conform to the general plan." On his blog, the city manager wrote, "People seem to either love or hate the company. Wal-Mart obviously didn't grow into the world's largest corporation without generating controversy... in 2005, the City Council adopted a new 20 year community vision that specifically discouraged Victoria as a site for "'big box', mega-block, auto-oriented strip development and the traffic patterns it generates" and instead supported "healthy economic investment in walkable blocks, connected to better serve the surrounding neighborhoods." The City moved to spell out the rules to implement those lofty, but not very specific goals, prior to Wal-Mart's application being processed. Wal-Mart still hasn't applied. But we now have a first draft of the new rules and are taking to the City Council tonight a proposal to finalize those rules. That way, Wal-Mart or any other retailer will have to follow the same rules when it comes to building new stores on Victoria... I hope all reasonable people can agree that we should have clear and consistent rules about what is and is not allowed to be built on Victoria—regardless of the company that will occupy the building. Applying our zonings laws is not a popularity contest. Once we agree on the new rules, they should apply to everyone—whether people like Wal-Mart or not."

The Stop Wal-Mart Coalition says it opposes Wal-Mart because it hurts local, established businesses. "Local businesses can't compete with Wal-Mart's low labor costs. To operate like the Wal-Mart "model," local retailers will have to eliminate reliable and long-time employees, and reduce or eliminate health care benefits, to cut labor costs. Local businesses can't compete with the Wal-Mart myth of low prices. Wal-Mart unlimited advertising resources tout low prices to bring in customers and convince them they're getting a good deal. A Wal-Mart promises a gain sales tax revenues - which cities depend on - but any Wal-Mart increase may be offset by a loss in sales tax revenues from local retailers. Wal-Mart changes the shopping behaviors of a community. When Wal-Mart opened in Oxnard, the Esplanade mall closed and the major retailers went to Ventura. What if we lost our mall? What would the community lose?"

Wal-Mart profits all go back to Bentonville, Ark. The profits our local retailers earn often go back into the community. Wal-Mart hurts local communities. Wal-Mart has no stake in our community. In fact, the negative impacts are far more expensive than the so called 'savings'. Wal-Mart erodes a community's middle class living standard by creating unemployment and under-employment (part-time and low-paying jobs). Three decent jobs are eliminated for every two Wal-Mart jobs created. The Orange County Business Council estimates a \$9 an hour difference between supermarket workers and Wal-Mart workers. Schools, churches, and other organizations lose vital participation, when local families are wrestling with unemployment or Wal-Mart-type under-employment. The blight of empty stores and the loss of historical buildings can accelerate, when a Wal-Mart displaces small local retailers. The San Diego Taxpayers' Association estimates that for each large discount retailer that moves in, 2 or 3 local retailers go out of business. Wal-Mart costs a city in public services. The Orange County Business Council cautions that a Wal-Mart can bring additional expense in the provision of sewage, road maintenance, water and electricity, etc. These costs may outweigh any net gains in sales taxes revenue. Commuter traffic increases, when Wal-Mart's low-wage workers cannot afford to live locally. Wal-Mart hurts taxpayers. Because of low wages and benefits, Wal-Mart workers depend on federal, state and locally subsidized public services. Examples of this taxpayer assistance include health care, food stamps and other taxpayer funded services. Wal-Mart workers report they are given an application for food stamp assistance, when they start work." To help the work of the Stop Wal-Mart Coalition, contact CAUSE, 2021 Sperry #18, Ventura 93003, (805) 658-0810. Readers are urged to contact Ventura Mayor Carl Morehouse and the city council at (805) 654-7827, or email them at council@ci.ventura.ca.us. Tell them: "The Victoria corridor is not for big box stores. Wal-Mart's proposed project is not compatible with your 20 year plan. Support Ventura neighborhoods, not big box chains. There are several thousand Wal-Mart supercenters---but only one Ventura."

Posted by Al Norman on Friday, September 28, 2007

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