



Opponents seek to get Wal-Mart on the ballot

By Kevin Clerici
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Resistance to a possible Wal-Mart store in Ventura has reached a fever pitch as labor-backed opponents have announced an all-out effort to get a measure before voters while city leaders have stressed patience.

The Stop Ventura Wal-Mart Coalition Action Team, claiming city leaders have repeatedly ignored their calls for a local ordinance to block a Wal-Mart supercenter, plans to soon submit language for a ballot measure. The group is aiming for the November 2008 ballot and will need at least 6,000 valid signatures, or 10 percent of Ventura's roughly 60,000 registered voters, to qualify.

The debate over a Wal-Mart store has raged locally since the world's largest retailer first talked to city planners two years ago about demolishing the Kmart store on Victoria Avenue and replacing it with one of its discount stores.

"We have not received the cooperation of our elected leaders, so we have decided to take the campaign to stop Wal-Mart directly to the voters," said coalition leader Jim Alger of the Ventura County Working People's Alliance, an organization affiliated with the Tri-County Labor Federation. "This will be a massive undertaking ... by concerned citizens who believe that we have a say in what does and doesn't get built in our own community."

At a public meeting last week attended by about 200 people, coalition members presented a dramatic slide show detailing Wal-Mart's alleged drain on communities, complete with images of Chinese workers in sweatshop conditions and Twisted Sister's "We're Not Going to Take It" booming from speakers. The coalition urged supporters to volunteer to collect needed signatures, post anti-Wal-Mart signs on their lawns or store windows and continue to press the Ventura City Council to introduce an anti-big-box ordinance as a way of forestalling a supercenter at the Kmart site.

Opponents fear increased traffic, an influx of low-paying jobs but no affordable housing, and negative effects on independent business owners in town. Current rules allow for a six-story building at the Kmart site.

"I share a lot of their concerns, but I don't think we need to act immediately to force Santa Maria's ordinance into our town," City Councilman Ed Summers said of Santa Maria's anti-big-box ordinance the coalition members have urged the council to endorse.

That ordinance restricts large retailers to using no more than 5 percent of their leasable floor area for the sale of non-taxable merchandise. Since groceries are exempt from taxation, such an ordinance effectively prohibits a Wal-Mart supercenter, typically 185,000 square feet or more and a combination of a traditional Wal-Mart store and a supermarket.

The Santa Maria ordinance, however, doesn't prevent construction of a regular Wal-Mart store with general merchandise.

Like Summers, fellow council members Bill Fulton and Christy Weir and Mayor Carl Morehouse — incumbents trying to keep their seats in the Nov. 6 election — favor a consensus approach and limiting big-box development through new development guidelines for the busy Victoria Avenue corridor.

Those guidelines, still in draft form and more than a year in the making, would force a large retailer like Wal-Mart to dramatically reduce the size of its traditional big-box model. The guidelines are scheduled to come back to the City Council in January for refinement and the council members expect to have guidelines finalized by the time any Wal-Mart store is considered.

In the meantime, the council has required a special conditional use permit for all new retail buildings in excess of 50,000 square feet on Victoria Avenue.

"It's very clear these are special interests trying to stop our ability to serve our customers," said Aaron Rios, a Wal-Mart spokesman, adding the Arkansas-based retailer is committed to building a store that appropriately fits and enlivens the aging shopping center. "This is not a big-box issue, because there is already one there in the Kmart."

Wal-Mart workers are not unionized, while most large grocery store chains in Ventura County have unions. Both labor and management at grocery store chains fear that supercenters will force existing supermarkets out of business.

"Wal-Mart wants to take the good-paying jobs in your grocery stores," said Martel Fraser, union representative of the United Food and Commercial Workers, Local 1036, speaking at the public meeting. She said the union has thrust "its full weight" behind the initiative effort.

Wal-Mart has signed a lease on the Kmart store, but has not submitted a formal application. The company last met with city staff in March and presented a concept plan to demolish the Kmart and replace it with an eco-friendly building closer to 150,000 square feet over submerged parking, city planner Patsy Stadelman said.

The store would be Wal-Mart's third in Ventura County, joining discount centers in Oxnard and Simi Valley.

Countering complaints about Wal-Mart's treatment of its workers, Rios said the company in January will expand the number of healthcare plans employees can choose among, which will allow them to select various deductibles, healthcare credits and premiums, depending on their needs.

The exact language of the ballot initiative has not been determined. The coalition is deliberating whether it will be a carbon copy of the Santa Maria law or add conditions to force mega-retailers to pay living wages and possibly provide housing, organizers said.

Some local business leaders feel the city should not be prohibiting a potential major source of tax revenue at a time when the city cannot afford adequate police and fire service.

The Stop Wal-Mart coalition, which includes the Coastal Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy, will try to convince voters that Wal-Mart's reputation of low wages and poor benefits would only contribute to a downward economic spiral in Ventura.

"I don't want Wal-Mart spilling into my little town of Ventura," resident Monica Watson said after watching the slide show and volunteering to collect signatures. "I would like a bigger Trader Joe's. That would be my dream for Ventura."

