

4/21/09

Ventura's Victoria Plan passes - with exemptions for Wal-Mart

The good news: The Ventura City Council passed the Victoria Corridor Plan with the 100,000 square foot limit on store size intact.

The not-so-good news: In spite of public outcry, the Ventura City Council added exemptions to the Victoria Plan that will make it easier for Wal-Mart to come into the dilapidated Kmart building on Victoria Avenue.

The Council majority supporting the exemptions on Monday night included ringleader Neal Andrews, followed by Mayor Weir and Councilmembers Morehouse, Summers, and Monahan. The only two who stood with the community against Wal-Mart were Deputy Mayor Bill Fulton and Councilmember Brian Brennan.

With the Super Store Ballot Initiative scheduled to go to Ventura voters in November, last night's council decision side-stepped the voters' will. Last spring, a huge community effort collected more than 8,000 valid signatures to place the initiative on the ballot. The Super Store initiative, if passed by Ventura voters, will restrict Wal-Mart and other new big boxes that sell groceries to no more than 90,000 square feet.

Monday's council vote delays implementation of the Victoria Plan for 10 years by allowing old ("nonconforming") buildings to undergo substantial "modernization" changes instead of rebuilding to conform to the Victoria Plan Codes. Instead of the "high wage, high value" employers the council repeatedly stated it wanted to attract to Victoria, those entering our city on Victoria may be greeted by "low wage, low value" Wal-Mart in a patched-up big-box from the '60s.

Thirty residents and business owners opposed to Wal-Mart spoke before the council vote. Speakers gave a wide variety of reasons for disliking and distrusting Wal-Mart. The room was filled to standing-room-only with over 100 Stop Wal-Mart supporters. Six individuals spoke in support of Wal-Mart and scrapping the Victoria plan. In the last weeks leading up to Monday's meeting, the council received more than 300 emails opposing Wal-Mart.

Livable Ventura, the citizens' group leading the charge for the Stop Wal-Mart Ventura Coalition, specifically asked the council to remove the loading docks exception from the new language and asked that any applications for new loading docks be required to go through the scrutiny of the city's formal permitting process. Loading docks, large platforms that receive "big rig" trucks, are required ONLY by high-volume stores like Wal-Mart and the grocery stores. Grocery stores have a single loading dock. Wal-Mart's recently submitted plan includes FOUR loading docks, so that it can be unloading trucks around the clock. We learned from speakers last night that Wal-Mart trucks are often longer than the typical big rig and require as many as 3 lanes to make a turn. An air quality specialist also informed the council about the air-polluting power of diesel big rigs and how air quality will deteriorate on lower Victoria.

The Wal-Mart application to the city is not complete. The Stop Wal-Mart Ventura Coalition will be monitoring and "critiquing" the proposal closely, as it proceeds through the Design Review Committee and the Planning Commission. And we Venturans will still get to vote in November to limit what Wal-Mart can do in our city. **Stay tuned - this fight is not yet over!**