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## Council again delays Wal-Mart: Six councilors want to 'reflect' on comments, reports

By TONI SCOTT - Staff Writer

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CHICO -- After hearing nearly three hours of public testimony, the Chico City Council decided to delay its decision on the controversial Wal-Mart expansion by one week, with a special meeting concerning the matter scheduled next week.

The meeting will be the second special meeting called to address the expansion in as many weeks.

Following testimony from at least 40 citizens, the City Council voted 6-1 Tuesday night to delay its decision, with the majority of the councilors agreeing with Councilor Andy Holcombe that they needed "time to reflect" on the hours of public comment and voluminous stacks of letters and reports received on the 82,500 square foot expansion. Councilor Larry Wahl cast the lone dissenting vote.

The expansion first came before the council Sept. 15 on an appeal of the Planning Commission's Aug. 20 denial of the project's necessary Environmental Impact Report.

Tuesday night was a continuation of that four-hour meeting that left zero time for public comment from the 73 speakers who signed up to discuss the project.

Tuesday's meeting was quite the opposite, with local business owners, Wal-Mart employees, concerned residents and average shoppers all offering up their opinions to the City Council.

Many of the expansion proponents urged the council to consider the expansion as a simple land-use decision, arguing that insurance, average wages and charitable giving should have little to no weight in the council's considerations.

Jolene Francis, president and CEO of the Chico Chamber of Commerce, said the Planning Commission was "distracted by politics" when it chose to deny the EIR and subsequently the project, contending that council meetings are "not the forum" to question Wal-Mart's business practices.

"Either Chico is open for business or we're not," Francis said. "It is up to you to decide ... forget the who and judge this land-use decision on the facts."

Staci Sasselli, a 15-year Wal-Mart employee agreed, humorously adding that when the expansion was initially proposed seven years ago she had just one child. She said she now has three.

"This is a land-use issue," Sasselli said. "It has nothing to do with how much money we give or how much we pay our associates."

Several members of the public, who labeled themselves as low-income shoppers, said Wal-Mart's expansion and subsequent plans to bring in more grocery items would provide them a greater opportunity to save money, with Chico resident James Husband saying the expansion is needed.

Husband said he lives near several senior citizens like himself and added the majority of his neighborhood shops at the store.

"I buy at Wal-Mart because they beat every other store in this town," Husband said. "People in this audience may have plenty of money, but I don't."

But opponents contended that Wal-Mart's low prices

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come at a greater cost to the Chico community, as well as the environment.

Lynne Bellante, whose husband Frank owns North Valley Bicycle, said money spent locally often stays locally, while dollars spent at Wal-Mart leave the community.

Bellante said her husband's business has already seen decreased business with Wal-Mart's presence and that any expansion would only increase the harm. "Profits generated by Wal-Mart go to Arkansas," Bellante said. "This expansion will hurt local business."

But with the EIR the main issue the council will consider, several proponents focused on the impact the project will have on the environment. Chico State University professor Mark Stemen said he was concerned about the increased traffic the project would bring.

Stemen, who previously conducted a city inventory on greenhouse gas emissions, said with more shoppers flocking to Wal-Mart following the expansion, greenhouse gas emissions would inevitably increase. Stemen said the city should be looking to approve projects that reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and not those that contribute to pollution.

"This project may be better than some," Stemen said. "But less bad is not good."

The council is expected to reach a decision on the expansion next Tuesday with the meeting beginning at 6:30 p.m. in the Chico City Council Chambers.

**BACKGROUND:** Wal-Mart initially proposed an 82,500 square-foot expansion of their Forest Avenue store in 2003, with the process going through years of appeals and legal challenges. Most

recently, the project's Environmental Impact Report was denied by a 5-2 vote by the Planning Commission. The Aug. 20 decision was appealed to the Chico City Council and was first heard by the council Sept. 15.

**WHAT'S NEW:** After continuing their Sept. 15 meeting, the Chico City Council heard nearly three hours of public testimony regarding the expansion Tuesday night, but made no decision on the matter.

**WHAT'S NEXT:** The council is expected to make its decision on the appeal Sept. 29 at a special meeting to be held at 6:30 p.m. at the City Council Chambers.

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