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Editorial: A tale of two big-box stores

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Our view: The city staff in Chico isn't treating two big-box stores differently, but the City Council is.

Some Chico residents are still fuming — and will be for a while — over the Chico City Council's handling of Wal-Mart's proposed expansion.

When Wal-Mart asked to expand its store on Forest Avenue, some councilors put the corporation through the wringer. The demands placed on Wal-Mart were unprecedented, but it scored political points with the Wal-Mart haters. When the big, nasty corporation from Arkansas refused to buckle under and do things such as contribute a million bucks for wood stoves, the council refused Wal-Mart's request to expand its store.

Now comes an expansion just up the street at Winco, a huge discount grocery store. The council wouldn't let Wal-Mart sell groceries because it supposedly would hurt stores such as Winco, but the city is letting Winco grow by 10,700 square-feet without even the hint of an extortion attempt.

Sound fishy? Many residents think so. But it's not exactly an apples-to-apples comparison.

First, it's worth remembering that people in city hall recommended approval of both expansions. It was the City Council that derailed the Wal-Mart expansion, rejecting the paid staff's advice.

Winco's expansion plan will never go to the council. Wal-Mart's proposal only reached the council because the council must approve a lot split

and subsequent general plan amendment. Winco's expansion doesn't extend onto a new lot.

Winco's expansion would add 10,700 square-feet to an existing store that's 79,100 square-feet.

Wal-Mart's expansion would have added 82,500 square-feet to a store that is now 126,000 square-feet. Wal-Mart said the expansion would have helped it add groceries, but with a recent remodeling of the existing store, Wal-Mart is now selling more groceries than before.

Even if the Winco expansion needed council approval, it wouldn't be a problem with this council because, well, it's not Wal-Mart. Some councilors think Wal-Mart is a bogeyman and a deep-pocketed corporation that can afford to pay a bounty to prove it cares about the community.

That's a load of nonsense. Wal-Mart gives far more back to the community in donations than Winco does.

When the local newspaper calls Wal-Mart in Chico, the store manager answers the phone and talks. She's active in the community. She's visible.

Winco, on the other hand, doesn't even have a phone number in the telephone book. What does that tell customers? If you're savvy enough to find one on the Internet, the person who answers it will refer you to the corporate offices in Idaho, which will promptly ignore your calls.

Still, we're glad to see Winco or any other business is successful enough to expand in this economy. We wish them continued success. The council should have the same attitude toward all employers in the city.

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