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Chico City Council, citizens have annual dialogue

By TONI SCOTT - Staff Writer

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CHICO — With concerns about the economic times and questions about recent Chico City Council decisions, the business community engaged the council and city staff in an open dialogue Friday morning at the 2010 Community Forecast.

The event, presented by the Chico Chamber of Commerce, attracted approximately 90 people, with business owners and community members asking the council and city staff to address key issues that defined 2009, while also focusing on the future of 2010.

City Manager Dave Burkland began the morning with an overview of the city's financial status, acknowledging that 2009 was particularly difficult for the city of Chico.

- [PHOTO GALLERY of the meeting](#)

"It really has been a tough couple years," Burkland said.

Burkland said continued revenue declines — including double-digit decreases in sales tax revenue — have put the city in a precarious financial situation.

Burkland said the city is almost \$600,000 below original 2009-2010 revenue projections.

Additionally, Burkland said Chico is poised for an even tougher 2010, saying city staff are "very

concerned" about the impacts the state budget and declining Chico State University enrollment will have.

During an hour-long question-and-answer period moderated by Chamber President and CEO Jolene Francis, Councilor Mary Flynn said the city played a part in creating jobs this past year, despite the troubled economy.

When asked about the city's role in spurring economic growth, Flynn said city funds provided to 3Core and Northern Rural Training and Employment Consortium exemplified the power of "leveraging" city resources.

"What we created is the potential of 185 new jobs in the community through our investment of \$225,000 in economic development funds," Flynn said.

Yet the discussion of job creation did not go without attention to one of the most controversial decisions the council made this past year.

Predictably, the council's denial of the proposed Wal-Mart expansion was broached, when a question regarding the administrative approval of Winco's 10,700-square-foot expansion was posed.

Although the council has yet to see the Winco project come before them — and perhaps won't — Councilor Andy Holcombe said the grocery store's expansion is "vastly different in scale" and does not require a zoning change like the Wal-Mart expansion.

Councilor Larry Wahl, who championed for the Wal-Mart expansion and joined councilors Jim Walker and Mary Flynn in voting for its approval, disagreed with Holcombe, saying the circumstances of the

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Wal-Mart denial weren't solely based on zoning regulations.

"Let's be brutally honest here," Wahl said. "Wal-Mart wasn't approved because it was spelled Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart didn't get approved because it didn't yield to extortion."

Wahl said the council's denial of the Wal-Mart expansion can reflect poorly to business owners and entrepreneurs, discouraging businesses from relocating or expanding in Chico.

"Those are the kinds of things that reverberate up and down the state of California," Wahl said.

He said to survive the economic hardships 2010 is expected to impose, Chico needs to create a business-friendly image and "put out the 'open for business' sign," with all the councilors offering their ideas for growing the Chico business base.

Solutions ranged from streamlining the planning process to investing money into local art projects, but ultimately, Burkland said even without these proposals, Chico's forecast is positive.

Addressing the crowd, Burkland said despite a troubled 2009 and an expected tumultuous 2010, Chico will continue to attract businesses and grow as a community, due to the very definition of what the city is and what Chico stands for.

"I truly believe that this community is unique," Burkland said. "I truly believe there are opportunities here like no where else."

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