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Editorial: Council posture a puzzling one

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Our view: There's a huge difference between paying development impact fees and a \$1 million ransom. The Wal-Mart decision reeks of extortion.

Nothing is simple when the Chico City Council is involved. Wal-Mart sought approval or rejection to an unambiguous question: Should the big-box retailer be allowed to expand its Forest Avenue store?

Seven years later, after hundreds of thousands of dollars in studies and many public meetings, the council gave its answer on Tuesday ...

Maybe.

It's hard to believe the council went down this road, but some councilors said they could be inclined to say yes (wink, wink ... nudge, nudge) if Wal-Mart would pony up some money.

You know, said Scott Gruendl, give \$1 million so that the city could help low-income residents get new woodstoves.

The piling on began. Mayor Ann Schwab said she wanted more solar arrays on the project. Tom Nickell said he wanted a stipulation that Wal-Mart would hire only local contractors for the expansion. Gruendl said he wanted improvements made at an intersection near the mall.

We can see the city demanding improvements to help mitigate the traffic, but new woodstoves for hundreds of Chico residents? What's the connection?

As one astute observer noted: "I don't recall Lowe's having to set up a Habitat for Humanity fund when it came to town? I don't recall Forever 21 having to set up a clothing bank for the poor. Or Chili's having to set up a takeout food bank to mitigate their smoke-producing grill. Or Sierra Nevada mitigating their emissions with a beer fund for the poor."

Retailers have paid for road improvements to mitigate traffic impacts — including recently with Costco, which helped pay for work on Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway along its property line when it expanded.

But what usually happens is that retailers or home builders pay development impact fees, then the city spends them where it sees fit.

Costco didn't have to buy fireplaces or build bike lanes or get forced to use local workers or solar arrays or people who got fired from other stores that were forced to close because of Costco's expansion.

The rules should not be different for Wal-Mart, or any other retailer. The council apparently sees some deep pockets and wants to dig in. It would never do the same thing with another retailer. Nor should it. Such an act borders on discrimination, even extortion.

It also sends the wrong message to anybody wanting to bring a business — which means jobs for residents — into the community. Before, businesses may not have agreed with the rules, but at least they knew what the rules were. Now, instead of a predictable process where you fill out your permits and pay your not-insignificant fees, you also have to run the gauntlet of the elected politicians who want a little grease for their pet causes.

Businesses need some predictability when wanting to come to town or expand. They need to know up

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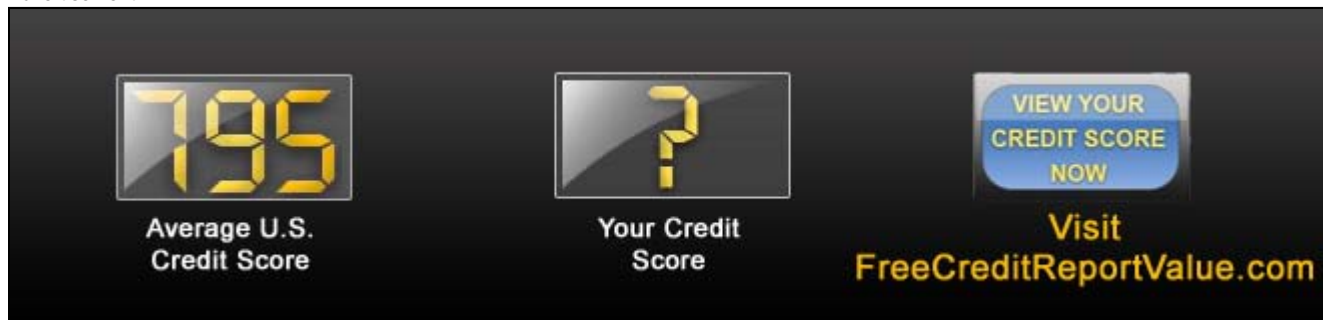
front what the city will want in the way of impact fees, rather than a councilor saying at the last minute that an extra \$1 million might change his mind.

Please note, that's might change his mind.

The council and city staff will mull this over until November. If the council decides such unfair treatment is OK, Wal-Mart probably will do one of two things. It will pay the ransom, or it will figure it's not worth the Chico hassle and instead will expand its Oroville store and build in Paradise.

Either way, Chico loses. Not because Wal-Mart doesn't expand in Chico — the city can certainly survive without Wal-Mart groceries — but because the precedent will scare off any business owner who wants to come to town. The message is disturbing: "Want to do business here and provide jobs? It'll cost you."

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