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Chico City Council denies Wal-Mart bid: Panel not impressed by project benefits

By TONI SCOTT - Staff Writer

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CHICO -- With additional project benefits that Mayor Ann Schwab described as "very underwhelming," the proposed Wal-Mart expansion was denied Tuesday night by the Chico City Council.

Wal-Mart has been seeking to expand its Forest Avenue store by 82,500 square feet, a change that would have allowed the store to offer produce and increased retail goods. Wal-Mart officials also said the expansion would have provided an additional 150 jobs.

The project's necessary Environmental Impact Report was denied by the Planning Commission Aug. 20., with Wal-Mart appealing that decision to the City Council soon after.

The council held three public meetings on the matter in September, ultimately denying the project at its Sept. 29 meeting. Councilors Larry Wahl and Jim Walker voted in favor of the expansion.

Although the council failed to approve the project at its Sept. 29 meeting, the council did encourage Wal-Mart officials to present additional benefits of the expansion. Several council members suggested certain measures they would like to see included in the project — including a solar array and a contribution of \$1 million to a fund to switch out older wood stoves — and said they would be more apt to approve the expansion if those requests were met.

Wal-Mart came back before the council Tuesday

with a list of additional benefits it added to the project since that time, but the list fell significantly short of what the council had suggested.

Angie Stoner, Wal-Mart spokeswoman, said the store would purchase additional mitigation points from the Butte County Air Quality Management District, but asserted Wal-Mart would not contribute any funding toward a wood stove change-out program.

Stoner also said store officials felt the increased skylights on the expansion exceeded any benefits of a solar array, and that the store had no plans to include solar panels in its project.

Wal-Mart would, however, implement an employee ride-share program, Stoner said, and would donate a bicycle to Bike Chico Week.

Stoner also said Wal-Mart would conduct a normal open bidding process for general contractors for construction on the expansion, but would hire sub-contractors within 100 miles of Chico.

The store also agreed to host a workshop for local businesses advising them on how to offer their products at the store and would donate store products to the Community Action Agency of Butte County through its Feeding America Program.

Still, the majority of the council was dissatisfied with Wal-Mart's efforts.

"I think if we put this on a scale of one to 10, the response from Wal-Mart is very underwhelming and perhaps a two," Schwab said. "I don't think that they took our proposal seriously."

Several members of the public also expressed their disapproval of the additional benefits.

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Chico resident Leonard Gundert likened Wal-Mart's increased offer to the purchase of Manhattan Island. The New York island was reportedly bought from American Indians for \$24 worth of trinkets and beads.

"The Europeans told the locals it was a bargain but it was really a bad deal. Wal-Mart's response to the Chico City Council proposal is a bad deal as well. Their pitiful offer falls woefully short of what was asked."

After much discussion, the council failed to pass a statement of overriding circumstances that would have identified the project benefits as outweighing the costs, by a 3-4 vote. The vote sealed the denial of the project, with Councilors Larry Wahl, Jim Walker and Mary Flynn voting in favor of the expansion.

A subsequent motion denying Wal-Mart's appeal of the Planning Commission decision was passed by a 4-3 vote, with Wahl, Walker and Flynn dissenting.

Flynn's vote was a bit surprising to some as she initially voted against the project expansion at the council's Sept. 29 meeting.

Explaining her decision after the meeting, Flynn said she gave the expansion "a great deal of thought" and felt the council was holding "different expectations for Wal-Mart."

Flynn said those expectations were not made clear at the beginning of the application process and were "not equitable."

Stoner agreed with Flynn, saying after the meeting that Wal-Mart has far exceeded the city requirements for the project.

Stoner said Wal-Mart was "considering all options"

as the store moves forward, but did not specify the store's plans. Wal-Mart can re-submit its expansion proposal to the city of Chico in one year.

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