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Film, signature drive used in local battle over Wal-Mart expansion

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The battle over Wal-Mart's local expansion plans is heating up as both the company and its opponents have increased efforts to promote their positions.

Local groups against Wal-Mart's expansion plans in Chico have organized several screenings of new documentary critical of the company.

Meanwhile, Wal-Mart has started collecting names of people supporting new supercenters in the town. More than 5,100 signatures have been collected in the past month, according to Kevin Loscotoff, Wal-Mart's regional manager for public affairs for Northern California,

The film, "Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price," has been shown locally several times since its Nov. 15 release on DVD.

Heather Schlaff, of Chico Advocates for a Responsible Economy, was pleased with the capacity crowd that saw the film during its Nov. 19 screening at the Pageant Theater.

While many may be enamored with the company's low prices, Schlaff said people need to look more closely at Wal-Mart and its practices.

"It's more than just a low price," she said.

Schlaff said the group decided to screen the film to give people an opportunity to voice their concerns about the expansion. She said she's not opposed to the current store, but is concerned the impact the expansions would have on the community.

Schlaff said she's concerned about the stores' impact on small towns. She said America's middle class is eventually hurt with Wal-Mart's business practices.

"It's their methods and their lack of concern of anything other than the bottom line," Schlaff said.

The Chico State University Student Democratic Club was scheduled to hold a screening of the film Thursday night. Press secretary Alex Steele, a media arts major, said the group doesn't want to get rid of the Wal-Mart but would like to see it be a more responsible corporate citizen.

He said the United States would do better the more people learn about Wal-Mart's business practices.

"What we want to do is start ringing some alarm bells," Steele said.

Employee benefits are one of the items discussed in the movie by David Greenwald. The film is critical of the discount retailer and its impact on towns, other businesses and its employees and customers.

Wal-Mart disputes many of the allegations made in the film. In a 28-page denouncement of the film, the company questions many of the elements of the film - including what really prompted the closure of a hardware store in

Middlefield, Ohio - and was critical of the motives of several of the current and former Wal-Mart employees interviewed in the film.

In a statement on the film, the Arkansas-based company touts its positive economic impact for consumers and communities and improvements to employee benefits and the environment. It stated the film didn't present a "single idea" aside from criticism.

The company also points to a recent survey from Global Insights showing how the company saves an average family \$2,300 per year.

Wal-Mart spokesman Loscotoff said he saw the movie. He said the film had many mischaracterizations and he was "disappointed that it has become a tool of propaganda."

Loscotoff said there is a "vocal minority," but many in Chico support the existing store and Wal-Mart's plans.

"There's support for supercenters, especially in Chico," Loscotoff said.

Last month, a table was set up inside the local store where people could sign up for the company's "Customer Action Network." Loscotoff said thousands have signed the cards, which are also for people supporting a "supercenter coming to Chico."

Loscotoff said the company will use the network to send information about its proposals and to notify people about upcoming hearings.

"It's an opportunity for customers to have their voices heard," Loscotoff said.

While many groups opposed to Wal-Mart have organized screenings, one group has opted not to show the film. Mike McLaughlin, chairman of the Save Our Gateway Committee, said he believes Wal-Mart will be the anchor for the planned Skyway Plaza shopping center west of Paradise. However, the developer has not announced which retailers will go in the center.

McLaughlin said he knew about the screenings in Chico which some people living on the ridge have attended. If there is an immediate need - such as a new initiative at the polls - the group may show the film, but he said the group is focused on challenging the center development in the courts.

"If this film had been offered prior to the lawsuit and prior to last year's election, we would have had public groups here to see it," McLaughlin said.

He said the film's points are similar to those raised in other films. McLaughlin said Wal-Mart does have a devastating impact on small towns.

"It does things that are not good for the existing climates, both economic and social," McLaughlin said.

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