



## Wal-Mart expansion draws packed house before commission

By HEATHER HACKING - Staff Writer

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CHICO -- Every seat in the Chico City Council Chambers was packed Thursday night, with people lined up along the walls and in an overflow conference room to hear deliberations before the Planning Commission about a proposed Wal-Mart expansion of its Chico store on Forest Avenue.

By 10 p.m., only five of the 76 people who filled out cards to speak had done so, and the commissioners made the decision to continue the public hearing until 6:30 p.m. Thursday.

People in the audience wore their sentiments on their lapels, with stickers being offered that said "NO" in red letters, and others wearing buttons that said "Jobs."

In a detailed report before public comment began, city staff recommended approval of the expansion, which would add 82,500 square feet of new indoor space to the south side of the existing 126,000 square-foot building. The expansion is primarily to add grocery sales, as well as expand other products.

An 18,546 square-foot outdoor seasonal center at the north of the building is also proposed.

City senior planner Zach Thomas gave the overview of the project.

He said the expansion plans are consistent with the city's General Plan and land use policies and conforms to Architectural Review Board guidelines. The expansion also fits the economic strategy of the

city — to create jobs and retain sales tax revenue.

He also said the expansion is proposed to create 150 additional jobs, in addition to the 350 people who currently work at Wal-Mart.

Due to bankruptcies by large national employers, the city has recently lost 700 retail jobs and unemployment in the city is 12.4 percent, up from 7.5 percent a year ago, a consultant reported.

The expectation, by the city's consultants, is that the estimated \$8.2 million it would cost for the expansion would generate about \$1 million in annual sales tax revenue due to the expansion.

City consultants have also determined the expansion would not cause urban decay by causing other retail outlets to go out of business. That's because there is still a demand for more retail in town, as businesses that have closed have not been replaced.

As for the environmental review, Thomas told the Planning Commission that "technical perfection is not required" by the California Environmental Quality Act, and that the guidelines for CEQA review have been followed.

Traffic and air quality affected from the expansion have been deemed "significant but unavoidable, which has occurred in the past such as for the Costco expansion, Enloe Medical Center expansion and Meriam Park, planners noted.

While traffic improvements would help traffic flow, they cannot be done without infringing upon other property owners. Also, Chico is already a non-attainment area for air pollution.

Heather Schlaff served as a spokesperson for Chico Advocates for a Responsible Economy, which has

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organized opposition to the Wal-Mart expansion.

She said the group is not against Wal-Mart shoppers and employees, nor the existing store. However, her group believes the expansion is unnecessary.

"We have Food Maxx, Winco and Costco," she said.

Her group called retired economic analyst David Gallo to present studies he had independently conducted that contradicted claims that the expansion would increase sales tax revenue.

"The implication is that any taxable retail sales are at the expense of other outlets," Gallo said.

Brett Jolley, also speaking with CARE, said he is a land use attorney from Stockton.

He said the environmental impact report for the project was done in 2006, at a time when the economy was dramatically different than it is today. He also stated concerns about whether the economic consultant firm hired by the city were biased because the firm had previously been hired by Wal-Mart to analyze superstores.

Jolley also said the property upon which Wal-Mart planned to expand was zoned "commercial services," which specifically excluded retail.

Those details will be looked at in the future.

City planners said they interpreted the zoning compatible with the Wal-Mart plans.

Jolene Francis, chief executive officer for the Chico Chamber of Commerce, said the proposed Wal-Mart meets all the criteria for city approval, and is very similar to plans for expansion of other retail such as Costco and Meriam Park.

She said the argument the expansion would harm other retail outlets is "not the role" of the Planning Commission.

The Chamber of Commerce "advocates for all businesses and for a fair planning process," she said.

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