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Wal-Mart public commenting ends

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CHICO — Another round of public comment continued Thursday on the proposed Wal-Mart expansion on Forest Avenue from 126,000-square-foot building, adding another 82,500 square feet to the store to sell groceries and expand the number of products sold.

About 40 people gave public comment last week, and another 40 spoke Thursday night on the merits and detriments of WalMart in general, as well as specifics on the expansion proposal.

Several questions remained for Planning Commissioners considering the proposal Thursday night, prompting another continuation of the discussion to July 30 at 6:30 p.m. at the Council Chambers.

However, the public comment period is now closed.

Staff asked that any questions that needed to be answered be poised soon so answers could be researched.

Planning Commissioner John Merz said he wanted clarifications before making a decision, plus he wanted time to read over new material presented Thursday.

Topics yet to be clarified included the maintenance of Business Lane, the road that leads toward a row of chain restaurants and In-N-Out Burger for the back entrance of Walmart. A representative for Oxford Suites said the road needs maintenance, and although Wal-Mart and other businesses are to share maintenance, the agreement for that maintenance is murky.

Roslyn Stelk, of the Oxford Hotel Group, said there is no evidence that the road near Wal-Mart will handle the added delivery and customer trips from the proposed Wal-Mart expansion. She said Business Lane needs work. Oxford Suites is willing to work with Wal-Mart, "but we need your help," Stelk said.

Staff said Wal-Mart currently receives 61 truck deliveries a week, 31 of which are 18-wheelers. With the expansion, this number is expected to increase to 85 deliveries, 39 being big-wheel trucks.

Commissioners also wondered about maintenance of roads leading to the Wal-Mart area, as more trucks and shopping traffic would travel through the area.

Commissioner Jon Luvaas also wanted to know if there is a local distribution center that could provide Wal-Mart with local produce, as Wal-Mart has stated that they like to provide local food when possible.

City planning staff has recommended approval of the approximately \$8.2 million expansion, stating that 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.

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.

Traffic and air quality affected from the expansion have been deemed "significant but unavoidable," which has occurred in the past such as for the

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Costco expansion, Enloe Medical Center expansion and Meriam Park, planners noted.

Several speakers during the two hours of public comments talked about how free-enterprise should prevail in the decision, and that people should be given the choice of where to shop. Many others talked about how low prices offered by Wal-Mart allowed people to spend money in other stores and to provide for their families.

Scott Douglass is a social worker for people with disabilities, and prefers to shop at Wal-Mart. He can't find the kind of bargains he finds at Wal-Mart at other retail stores. Douglass also praises the fact Wal-Mart hires people with disabilities, he said.

Alan Gair said that the corporation is a "dangerous, monopolistic company.

"The Planning Commission is our only line of defense," he said. "We ask you to protect Chico's consumers from this monster."

Another speaker challenged the view that the expansion would not harm other stores. She said the economic studies that were done for the projects happened two years ago, when economic decisions were different.

Many comments against the Wal-Mart expansion included economics. Some said that they did not believe money spent at Wal-Mart stayed locally, as with other grocery stores, which are California-based (such as FoodMaxx).

Stacie Sasselli challenged the idea that Wal-Mart doesn't pay workers well. She said she works at Wal-Mart and said she has bought home while working there and last year bought a car from a local car dealer.

WINCO Foods is also expanding, she said, but there is not the opposition to that change because it isn't Wal-Mart.

Bob Linscheid, representing the Chico Economic Planning Corporation, said that he has been an advocate for businesses for 25 years. He said the decision about Wal-Mart is a land use decision. If the project meets the California Environmental Quality Act and other requirements, it should be approved, he said.

Others criticized Wal-Mart's purchasing practices, including imports from China, which is known to rely on energy from coal plants that contribute greatly to greenhouse gas emissions.

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