



Editorial: Wal-Mart debate often irrational

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Our view: It's difficult to predict how the Chico City Council will vote on Wal-Mart's expansion, but approval should be a fairly simple decision.

What should be a pretty straightforward decision comes before the Chico City Council Tuesday night: Should a business be allowed to expand if it's right in the middle of a huge commercial zone, meets critical needs of a large segment of the community in terms of affordable goods, provides jobs for hundreds of people at a competitive wage, and puts desperately needed sales tax dollars in the city's coffers?

Unfortunately, the business is Wal-Mart, and in Chico, that makes the decision anything but straightforward.

The environmental impact report that would allow the project to proceed was voted down by the Planning Commission for reasons so contrived that even the ideologues on that panel had to realize they were bogus.

They complained about traffic on a street lined with commercial businesses, as planned since the 1970s. If Wal-Mart isn't allowed to expand, one would assume that vacant lot would someday be filled with a different commercial venture. And what's the difference?

They fretted about increases in greenhouse gases in the form of car exhaust. Let's see, you can drive to one store, park, and then buy food, clothes, electronics, furniture, tools, auto supplies and a

partridge in a pear tree, or you can drive to seven different stores to fill that list. Hmm.

They worried about the store's impact on downtown Chico. Frankly, we don't see much competition between the types of stores downtown and Wal-Mart. The expansion wouldn't add office space, a trendy boutique, cool restaurant, bar or tattoo parlor as close as we can tell. The biggest part of the expansion would be the addition of a grocery store, and the only grocery downtown is Chico Natural Foods, which isn't close to having the same clientele.

No question downtown is going to suffer in the near future, but it's going to suffer because Chico State University might be cutting back by a couple of thousand students — a couple of thousand customers. Maybe we ought to go after the California State University system. Did they do an EIR on that cutback?

Our favorite complaint by the Planning Commission is that Wal-Mart sells goods made in China — like Kleen Kanteens and Chico Bags, both embraced as models by the sustainability cabal that seems to be taking over here. Both are made in China, but somehow, not a problem.

Actually, there are a lot of favorite complaints, like that Wal-Mart didn't consider adding a solar power array. If that's going to become a requirement to locate a business in Chico, it's going to scare off quite a few potential new ones.

The reasons didn't have to make sense. The commission was just was sending a message. Not the message it thought it was sending, but a message nevertheless:

Business isn't welcome in Chico.

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It will be interesting to see if the council wants to reiterate that message, in light of the fact that even the most liberal of the liberals on the council now give lip service to "economic development" as the only way out of the city's budget mess. Grow the economy, and the multimillion-dollar deficit goes away without having to cut firefighters or police or suggest raising taxes.

Easy to say. Let's see if they walk the talk.

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