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Editorial: Decision not just about Wal-Mart

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Our view: The City Council's pending vote on Wal-Mart's expansion will have a broader impact on Chico's economy.

We'd like to believe Chico City Councilor Andy Holcombe's assertion Tuesday that he hasn't made up his mind yet on the Wal-Mart expansion and wanted to "reflect" on the testimony he heard that night.

But it stretches credibility that after seven years of debate and study, the politicians who run our fair city didn't know last Tuesday how they are going to vote next Tuesday.

We suspect rather they're spending these seven days polishing and memorizing the little speeches they'll all give to justify their positions before the vote.

The speech is easy if you support the expansion, because the arguments make sense. It's a commercial enterprise seeking to expand in a commercial district.

It's on one of the widest streets in Chico, with a bus stop right out front and the freeway out back. It will bring jobs for Chicanos and sales tax revenue for the city.

The opponents have a tougher task. They can't reject the expansion just because it's Wal-Mart, without violating the U.S. Constitution's guarantee of equal protection under the law. And the arguments that the expansion will drive other stores out of

business seem mighty speculative.

Judging from the leading questions that were asked the last couple of weeks, several councilors in opposition appear to be leaning toward the excuse that an increase in traffic will come with the expansion and air quality will suffer. The 800-page report from the city's planners doesn't find too much of a problem, but some on the dais seemed to be grasping desperately at that straw.

And that's a mistake. Any business that is successful will draw traffic. If it doesn't draw traffic it's an out-of-business. To argue that a business shouldn't have any impact — as one Chico State University professor actually urged Tuesday night — is to argue it should not be allowed to succeed. For the council to embrace that argument is to embrace economic failure as city policy. That's the reality of the world most of us have to live in.

About 8 p.m. Tuesday as the council was in session, there were roughly 180 cars, pickups and minivans in the Wal-Mart parking lot. It was tough to get a firm count, because vehicles were coming and going regularly. It doesn't seem like a prime shopping time, but people were streaming in and out of the store pretty steady.

It's a safe bet that far more people did their shopping at Wal-Mart in the three hours the council was meeting, than have offered their comments to the City Council or Planning Commission over this whole drawn-out process.

It's also certain more people lined up to apply for a job at Forever 21 than have commented on the Wal-Mart expansion.

And it's pretty clear most of them would support certain economic growth over theoretical impacts. A lot of folks aren't doing well in today's economy.

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