



A measure we can support

In today's age of paid political signature gatherers, we are leery about ballot initiatives. However, the campaign to stop Wal-Mart and other large retailers with non-taxable inventory from setting up shop in Ventura is an effort we can put our support behind.

03/06/2008

In today's age of paid political signature gatherers, we are leery about ballot initiatives. However, the campaign to stop Wal-Mart and other large retailers with non-taxable inventory from setting up shop in Ventura is an effort we can put our support behind.

That effort, which would prevent any retailer larger than 90,000 square feet with 3 percent or more of its space devoted to selling non-taxable items (groceries, etc. — meaning an Ikea or large electronics store wouldn't be stopped by the measure) from opening within the city of Ventura, is a far better researched and reasoned measure than other recent initiative efforts. By addressing very serious worries, such as concerns about eminent domain or the impact concerns about Wal-Mart could have on other large retailers that may offer a major sales tax boon to the city, initiative organizers have blunted some of the major concerns of their potential opponents.

The best argument for supporting this initiative is that doing so would bolster other efforts to strengthen Ventura's own identity and local business offerings, followed closely by the fact that resisting a Wal-Mart at the Kmart plaza means resisting the massive outlay of municipal resources that would be necessary to support it.

A retailer known for leveraging its worldwide clout to undercut competitors, Wal-Mart's interest in building a Superstore offering groceries at the Kmart site is worrisome. It would threaten the ability of Trader Joe's, Ralphs, Vons and other major grocery chains to do business. A common argument to this line of thinking is that those stores do not appeal to the same customers that would shop at Wal-Mart, and opposing the store on those grounds is simply arrogant hypocrisy. In reality, though, the major supermarket chains still employ a unionized (although weakening) workforce and Trader Joe's offers very affordable quality groceries without scrimping on support for its employees.

Ventura is also dotted with smaller independent food retailers already straining from the presence of major grocery stores. They include Midtown's Green Market (itself a replacement of the historic Jue's Market), Sam's Central Market and the Red Barn on the

Avenue and specialty retailer's such as Shamsi's Deli and the La Mantia Italian grocery. Such establishments strengthen neighborhood identity.

All of these retailers have something to be concerned about in Wal-Mart's shadow. So does the city. Whatever reservations one has about a Vons or a Ralphs or an Albertsons, the additional strain of a Wal-Mart could mean added pressure at their locations in Ventura.

A key argument in support of Wal-Mart is the blight of the Wal-Mart site, the idea that anything is better there than nothing. However, a Wal-Mart meeting the 3 percent grocery threshold could mean the closure of other grocery stores throughout the city, in turn increasing the possibility of blighted properties throughout town.

Of course, that threat doesn't stop with grocery stores. It could mean more empty storefronts throughout town, rather down the street at the iconic Salzer's complex, itself already facing the challenges of an increasingly digital marketplace, or across the 101 in Downtown and Midtown, where small, locally owned retailers still struggle with high rent and increased competition from large retailers.

Yes, it is already worrisome that Target has just opened its second store so close to its first in Ventura. It would have been nice to see a unique retailer at the Pacific View Mall. Target, at least, has opened through cooperation with the city and its neighbors and at a site capable of supporting its impact. With mostly taxable merchandise, it remains a contributor to our local economy.

Overall, the lesson remains that this community must both support its local businesses and look deeper at the impact of those wishing to set up shop in our city.