

Wal-Mart debate rolls back in Ventura

Opponents of big box stores gather as city council elections loom

~ By MATTHEW SINGER ~

Indicating that the debate over big box stores coming to Ventura is far from over, members of the Stop [Wal-Mart](#) Coalition gathered at the Unitarian Universalist Church on Sept. 26 to discuss the still looming possibility of the controversial retail chain establishing itself along Victoria Avenue.

And with the city council election little more than a month away, opponents of the company believe the time is now to let the candidates know that the approval.

“We feel we have received good cooperation from the city in the past, but the answer we’re hearing is, ‘We’d love to stop Wal-Mart, but we can’t,’ ” said Das Williams, staff person for Livable Ventura, the group that organized the meeting. “We want to make it clear to the city that Ventura as a whole doesn’t just want Wal-Mart stopped but it demands [the city] do something about stopping Wal-Mart, and there are legal tools in place to stop further big box development in the Victoria corridor.”

Wal-Mart, which already has stores in Oxnard and Simi Valley, first broached the idea of building an outlet at 1739 S. Victoria Ave. — a space currently occupied by [Kmart](#) — two years ago. The company’s latest proposal is for a 150,000 square foot “supercenter,” with grass and a fountain in front of the facility and an underground parking lot beneath it.

According to City Manager Rick Cole, Wal-Mart has presented the city with preliminary design plans he deemed “encouraging.” But he emphasized that the city has yet to receive an application from the company.

Williams said the store would increase traffic and create more low-wage jobs while taking up space that could be used to meet Ventura’s housing demands. He said the city could demand Wal-Mart provide housing for its employees, “at the very least.” He referred to the company as a potential “black hole to Ventura business” that would end up driving out many local, independently owned stores.

“It’s something negative for Venturans,” Williams said, “not just socially but economically and environmentally.”

Cole said Wal-Mart would, under law, conduct a full environmental impact report and is committing to constructing a “green” store. Williams countered that the company has not specified what it means when it promises an eco-friendly building. Under basic Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification, it could be simply “decent insulation and bike racks,” Williams said.

Williams said the Stop Wal-Mart Coalition will hold at least two more meetings prior to the Nov. 6 election.

Meanwhile, Cole said it has been about four months since the city heard anything new from Wal-Mart. He said it could take up to a year before any ground would be broken on a new store from the day its application is finally submitted. But he added the city has not yet taken a stance either way on the Wal-Mart issue.

“We’re not looking to discriminate for or against Wal-Mart,” Cole said. “We’re trying to get whatever is built there to conform to the general plan.” ✳