



Union says Wal-Mart could hurt Ventura communities

By [Paul Sisolak](#) 12/11/2008

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A union representing county grocers has stated that a Wal-Mart proposed for Victoria Avenue, in tandem with a weakened economy, will more than likely force the closure of a nearby supermarket if plans to usher in the giant retailer to Ventura follow through within the next year.

“The Vons on Telephone (Road and Victoria Avenue) would close,” says Martel Fraser, an officer with the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) Local 1036 in Camarillo.

Having taken a staunch opposing stance against a Wal-Mart from coming in to Ventura — where the commercial giant would replace a former K-Mart — the UFCW also maintains that walkable community of senior citizens served by the placement of Vons and other local stores in the area would suffer if the grocery store were to shut down.

There comments follow on the heels of a decision made last month by the Ventura City Council, which held off the adoption of an ordinance that would have passed down tight restrictions on big-box retailers that feature grocery departments.

Instead, the council opted to place the issue on the 2009 ballot; that vote will determine if Wal-Mart, which holds a long-term lease on the property, will be

allowed to expand over 90,000 square feet, and if it can sell groceries once it moves in.

But groceries or no groceries, Fraser says the Vons at the Victoria/Telephone intersection, is vulnerable nonetheless, barely operating just above a 1 percent profit margin this year.

“It’s really unfortunate they (Wal-Mart) picked this time, when we’re in a recession,” she stated. “If you have that low margin of profit, at that point businesses will start closing.”

An e-mail seeking comment from a Vons representative was not returned in time for the Reporter’s deadline, but according to the company’s current online fact book, national Vons sales saw an increase from \$9.3 million to \$13.4 million, from the first through fourth quarters of 2007. No figures were specifically available for the store’s several Ventura County locations.

What’s more important, according to Fraser, is that the community of senior citizens who reside within walking distance of the Vons will be compromised when Wal-Mart opens almost a mile away.

“Rather than having a walkable community, you’d have people get in their cars and drive,” she said.

The problem is that the majority of people who live at the 150-resident Cypress Place senior community no longer drive. It would be a “tremendous disadvantage,” says Jim Duran, the community’s executive director, because approximately 75 residents in Cypress’ assisted living still drive, compared to only 25 percent of seniors who live there independently.

“If that’s true and that does close up this walkable community, that would be a terrible thing for our seniors,” he said.

According to Fraser, other chain markets may fare better under the shadow of Wal-Mart. She said Trader Joe’s, which is in the same plaza, and the neighboring Green Thumb nursery, will take hits. Ralphs, across the street on Victoria, will stay intact.

Terry O’Neill, director of public relations for Ralphs, had little to say about the company’s supermarket on Victoria, and would not comment on the potential impacts, good or bad, Wal-Mart may bring.

“It’s been going quite well for us,” he said.

In light of businesses, both corporate and independent, going under in the wake of the U.S. recession, independently owned grocers in Ventura who are not unionized have expressed a bit more confidence about Wal-Mart’s imminence.

Trang Pham, co-owner of the Green Market in Midtown Ventura, takes stock in her loyal customer base.

“They just walk on in,” she said. “We’ve already established a relationship with a lot of customers.”

However, Pham still has reservations.

“Being independent like us, we certainly don’t get the incentive like the big chain markets,” she said. “Even with Smart & Final down the street, they’ve already been hurting us. They sell in bulk. People go there to save money.”

In that respect, another mode of recent cash savings may encourage consumers, she said, to opt for places like Wal-Mart over local merchants in closer proximity.

“Now that gas has come down, I don’t think (people) would mind driving further,” Pham said.

Independent, niche retailers like Lassen’s in Ventura claim total immunity from the effects of a Wal-Mart or any other big-box business.

Wal-Mart, according to Scott Parvel, Lassen’s store manager, is “totally a different beast. We’re in the natural foods industry. They’re not even a competitor.”

Since the family-owned chain of health food stores sells products aimed to a certain clientele, products that a Wal-Mart would not carry on its shelves, customers won’t stray, according to Parvel.

“You won’t find a Procter-and-Gamble anything in here,” he said. “They choose to shop here because they care more about the products they’re consuming.”

Could a Wal-Mart actually aid business for some stores?

“Sometimes things like this do help us out. It’s hard to say,” said Parvel. “Does it put a strain on the commercial chains? Absolutely.”