



Wal-Mart approved, despite objections

200 crowd Hartford Common Council meeting

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HARTFORD - A mostly disappointed crowd of nearly 200 filed out of City Hall late Tuesday night facing the reality that the community will soon be home to a 183,198-square-foot Wal-Mart Supercenter.

After a public hearing that lasted more than three hours, the Common Council voted 7-2 to approve the annexation of land needed for the development and the commercial zoning also required. Alderpersons Tony Garza and Dennis Hegy voted against both items and alderpersons Kathleen Isleb, Chuck Shortt, Wayne Rusniak, Jim Core, Jacki Lokken, Peter Erdman and Joe Dautermann voted to approve.

The site is on land west of the city on Highway 60 near Pleasant Hill Cemetery in the town of Hartford.

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A flood of speakers flocked to the podium to speak about the ways they believe the Wal-Mart will spell disaster for the community because of increased traffic congestion, its potentially negative impact on small businesses and environmental concerns.

Several speakers also spoke in favor of the new store, saying it will provide more choices for area shoppers and will keep money local that is now being spent in West Bend and other nearby communities which already have Wal-Marts.

"As Americans, free enterprise is one of our rights," said proponent Veronica Cook, adding that she would like to shop at the new store but doesn't plan to completely avoid other local merchants.

Opponent Jim Algiers questioned the council's wisdom in even considering the new store in light of severe traffic congestion along Highway 60. He said the recent failure by the Washington County Board to support a northern reliever route to

reduce traffic congestion on the major thoroughfare means that it's not the right time to add thousands of additional vehicles to the road.

He asked the council to wait until it has solved existing traffic problems before approving something that will make the situation worse.

"There's no urgency. This is the wrong project at the wrong time in the wrong place," Algiers said. "You need a reliever route before you do this."

Signicast Corp. President Terry Lutz also spoke against the project, saying that as one of the county's largest employers, he is concerned the store will adversely impact his community and his employees.

"We haven't solved the traffic problems, yet. Wal-Mart will decrease our quality of life,"

Lutz said.

Several speakers also questioned Wal-Mart's policies on things such as providing full-time benefits for its employees, pay rate issues and the importation of goods from China.

During the council discussion, Core said that the council must vote on the merits of the annexation without getting involved in the practices of individual companies.

"We've never asked any employer about what they are going to pay their employees. That is the employer's business," Core said.

Rusniak said the council and the city's planning staff did their due diligence in researching all the issues pertaining to Wal-Mart and its impact on the city. The issue has been studied for more than two years, he pointed out, and the council didn't need to delay taking action as was requested by several opponents.

City Planner Justin Drew and the Hartford Planning Commission both recommended approval of the annexation and rezoning of the property. Drew said the company has complied with all requirements mandated by the city and the proposal is in line with the city's land use plan for the site.

Garza said he couldn't support the annexation because of his concerns about its potential impact on nearby wetlands and streams.

According to preliminary estimates based on traffic patterns at existing Wal-Mart Supercenters, the new store would generate from 16,000 vehicle trips per day on weekdays to 26,000 trips on weekends.

Wal-Mart currently operates 1,430 Supercenters in the United States. The firm also operates more than 500 Sam's Clubs and has more than 1.2 million employees worldwide.

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