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Wal-Mart and the Battle Against Sprawl

by Martin J. Bennett

Rohnert Park is now the epicenter for the battle against sprawl and big box development in the North Bay.

In April, the Rohnert Park Planning Commission unanimously denied the proposal by Wal-Mart to enlarge its existing discount store into a 167,000 square-foot supercenter. Wal-Mart appealed the decision to the city council and in July the council voted to approve the project. Council member Jake Mackenzie was the lone dissenting vote.

A broad coalition of labor, environmental, and community organizations from across the county organized a grassroots campaign against the supercenter. This year-long effort included canvassing most households in the city, tabling at local supermarkets, and phone banking city residents. Hundreds of opponents packed both the planning and city council meetings, and the coalition delivered more than 4000 signatures to the city council from residents opposed to the project.

Following the city council vote, Sonoma County Conservation Action and the Sierra Club filed a lawsuit challenging the approval of the EIR and the project.

The coalition is continuing to make the case to the community that the costs of the project far outweigh the benefits.

The economic and environmental impacts of the proposed supercenter are regional and extend far beyond Rohnert Park. The controversy raises fundamental questions about future growth and

the necessity for proactive city and regional planning to promote equitable and sustainable development.

Development in Sonoma County is inevitable. According to the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG), the population of Sonoma County will increase by twenty-three percent over the next twenty years. In 2008, voters approved a landmark initiative to meet this challenge, creating the two-county SMART train that will run on tracks adjacent to Highway 101 from Cloverdale to Larkspur. The build-out of the train system provides the opportunity for city-centered 'transit-oriented development' (TOD) around the fourteen SMART train stations--development that could accommodate ninety percent of the projected population growth.

TOD is densely built, mixed-use development within one-half mile of transit stations, accessible by bicycle and foot, and with a variety of retail, office, and small businesses. Through land-use planning and public funding, municipalities can promote development near transit stations that includes good jobs paying family-supporting wages, affordable housing for all income groups, open space, and walkable neighborhoods.

The Wal-Mart supercenter will be located a quarter of a mile from the site of the planned Rohnert Park SMART train station and is a direct threat to such careful and appropriate planning.

Opponents of the Wal-Mart supercenter believe it undermines compact and equitable development in Rohnert Park, and violates the city's general plan, which mandates access by residents to neighborhood supermarkets. The project undercuts transit-oriented development's efforts to reduce low-wage work, support local business, tackle global warming, and lay the foundation for a robust regional economy.

Nearly one third of the workforce in Sonoma County are currently 'working poor' and do not earn a self-sufficiency, or 'living wage.' According to the Insight Center for Community and Economic Development in 2008, two parents working full-time to support two

children in Sonoma County must each earn \$14.90 an hour or \$62,940 a year to pay for food, housing, medical care, child care, and transportation.

Sonoma State University economist Robert Eyer reports that the supercenter will contribute to job quality decline and increase the problem of working poverty. According to his analysis, the county will lose 105-211 jobs--mostly good jobs that pay hourly wages for full-time workers ranging from \$17.67 per hour at Pacific Market, a local independent grocer, to \$23.36 at Raley's and Safeway. The Wal-Mart supercenter will employ 450 workers, and, according to the company, the typical full-time worker at Wal-Mart earns \$12.10 an hour.

With regard to global warming, the supercenter will have adverse effects on air quality and greenhouse gas emissions. In order to comply with AB 32, a 2006 state legislative measure, all nine cities and the county have pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions twenty-five percent by 2015. However, the Eyer report notes that Pacific Market will close if the supercenter is built, and its 8,000 customers will drive an extra 28,400 miles each week to shop for groceries.

Further, Stacy Mitchell, author of *Big Box Swindle*, reports that vehicle miles driven per customer will increase because a supercenter draws shoppers from a greater distance than a discount store. Indeed, since Wal-Mart's rapid expansion in the late 1970s, miles traveled per household to shop has skyrocketed by three hundred percent, while total household driving increased by seventy-five percent.

As for local business, there are sixty local suppliers that provide produce and merchandise to Pacific Market, and more than seventy supply Oliver's, the largest grocery in nearby Cotati. Wal-Mart suppliers, on the other hand, are nearly 100 percent national and global firms.

The 'Go Local' movement has demonstrated that patronizing local businesses ensures that more dollars remain in the community.

Studies by Civic Economics demonstrate that locally-owned firms produce two to three times more economic activity within the local economy than national chains --including locally-retained profits, wages paid to local residents, purchases from local suppliers, and contributions to local nonprofits.

The Wal-Mart supercenter will undermine transit-oriented and equitable development in the North Bay. To accommodate population growth and to promote sustainable development, all cities along the 101 corridor in Marin and Sonoma counties must prioritize the creation of good jobs and affordable housing near SMART train stations.

A favorable outcome of the lawsuit could force the City of Rohnert Park to revisit the decision to approve the Wal-Mart expansion. Two planning commissioners, John Borba and Amy Ahanotu, who voted against the Wal-Mart project ran for the city council this past fall. Ahanotu was elected and Borba was narrowly defeated. The battle to halt the supercenter is far from over.

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