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Foes, fans of Walmart expansion in Rohnert Park set to square off again



The Walmart in Rohnert Park.

By Matt Brown
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Wal-Mart, the world's largest retailer, is rekindling a controversial plan to expand its Rohnert Park location and create the North Bay's first so-called supercenter — a retail space big enough to encompass three football fields and offer shoppers a full array of groceries along with the store's existing selection of consumer goods, ranging from electronics to diapers.

The proposal, on hold since it was first approved by the City Council four years ago, has fueled a long-running standoff with local labor advocates and environmentalists, who won a partial court victory in 2011 that sent the project's environmental review back to the drawing board.

The lawsuit and heated city hearings years ago made the supercenter project one of the most disputed in Rohnert Park — a Sonoma County city less accustomed to divisive conflicts over land use and big-box chains. Wal-Mart opened the Redwood Drive store in 1992, its first store north of the Golden Gate. The only other Sonoma County Wal-Mart is in Windsor.

The expansion is supported by local customers attracted to the chain's low prices and advocates of unfettered business, including many Rohnert Park leaders and business owners.

But the campaign by opponents, including groups and individuals based outside the city, reflects a national discussion about Wal-Mart, long a lightning rod for critics of low wages, pricing practices that activists say undercut local merchants and a business model that opponents contend puts a heavy strain on the world's environment.

Activists have successfully fought off Wal-Mart projects in Santa Rosa and Petaluma on those grounds. Some of the same campaigners are lined up against the Rohnert Park supercenter, making the expansion proposal a key test for the retail giant on what has historically been friendly turf.

"Wal-Mart wouldn't stand a chance in a place like Sebastopol or Healdsburg," said Rick Luttmann, a retired Sonoma State University professor and Rohnert Park resident who is against the expansion. "Rohnert Park is pro-business. It seems to be rather apolitical. It seems like people are busy with their own lives and are less politically active than in other places. But there's still significant opposition to Wal-Mart."

The Rohnert Park Planning Commission will consider the expansion proposal in a 6 p.m. hearing tonight. Any decision is likely to result in an appeal to the City Council, a repeat of the city's decision-making process in 2010.

This time around, the business landscape is somewhat different for Wal-Mart. While the retailer seeks to add 35,000 square feet to its 132,000-square-foot Redwood Drive store — where it plans to add a grocery — the company is set to open within the next several months a smaller neighborhood grocery market on the city's east side.

The approach reflects Wal-Mart's bid to diversify its business model in the wake of decreasing consumer support for the kind of mega-stores that helped the Arkansas-based retailer build its global empire. The approach also reflects a nimbler Wal-Mart adapting to demand for smaller, more convenient stores and expanded online retail options, said Delia Garcia, a company spokeswoman.

"The two stores serve different customer groups," she said. "The neighborhood market is part of the strategy but is not the only strategy. There's a place for the supercenter and for expanding e-commerce."

The supercenter could offer a significant boost for the city's sales tax coffers, though officials have yet to say how much, and would help serve Rohnert Park's growing population, city officials said. The city broke ground this summer on 1,600-home development, the first new homes to be added in Rohnert Park in a quarter century.

"I'm sure it's the housing units that will play a factor" in fueling the need for additional and expanded retail outlets, said Marilyn Ponton, the city's economic development director. "We not only attract new businesses, but we also work on retention and how we can help them grow."

In 2009, Wal-Mart announced its plans to significantly enlarge its Rohnert Park store on the west side of Highway 101 with a full grocery section. Planning commissioners voted to deny the project in April 2010. Three

months later, acting on an appeal from Wal-Mart, the City Council voted 4-1 to overturn the Planning Commission and approve the project. Councilman Jake Mackenzie cast the lone dissenting vote.

Joe Callinan, the city's current mayor and a councilman at the time, supported the project four years ago and hasn't changed his stance since then.

"I'm a free enterprise man," Callinan said. "There's no reason Wal-Mart shouldn't expand. They run a good business. If all of our governments were run like Wal-Mart, we wouldn't have any financial problems."

The City Council set to decide on the resubmitted plans has one new member. Amy Ahanotu replaced Councilwoman Amie Breeze in late 2010.

The city's approval four years ago drew a legal challenge from the Sierra Club and Sonoma County Conservation Action, which together sued Rohnert Park on environmental grounds. Sonoma County Judge Rene Chouteau sided with the plaintiffs and ordered the city to redo the project's environmental report.

In the meantime, Wal-Mart moved ahead with plans to open a smaller community grocery store off Golf Course Drive in the Mountain Shadows Plaza, which has been without an anchor tenant since Pacific Market went out of business in 2011. That grocery outlet is expected to open this fall, company officials say.

"It's really about responding to changes in customer shopping habits," said Garcia, the Wal-Mart spokeswoman.

Wal-Mart opponents are girding for another fight. Marty Bennett, a Santa Rosa Junior College professor and co-chairman of North Bay Jobs with Justice — formerly the Living Wage Coalition — said Wal-Mart does not pay its store employees a sufficient wage and offers few benefits that could help low-income workers rise out of poverty.

"Wal-Mart is the driver of the low-wage economy," he said. "There are major issues in terms of labor standards."

Bennett and others have also voiced concerns about Wal-Mart's affect on Rohnert Park businesses. He said Pacific Market closed its Mountain Shadows store under the threat of Wal-Mart's expansion.

Garcia said small businesses in Wal-Mart's orbit tend to benefit from the traffic that the big box store generates.

She said the company's average pay for store employees is \$13 per hour and employees have access to affordable health care plans. She said the expanded superstore would add 85 jobs at the Redwood Drive location.

Wal-Mart's new grocery market is hiring 95 employees, according to Valentina Allen, the store manager.

"People in Rohnert Park have been excited to have stores here that bring jobs to the city," Allen said. "We're proud of the jobs we offer."

Environmentalists, meanwhile, have criticized Wal-Mart for the large amount of greenhouse gases its vast supply chain creates. Big-box stores, they say, also encourage longer and more frequent car trips and foster unwanted urban sprawl.

"Rohnert Park has a lot of potential to have walkable communities, but Wal-Mart reverses that," said Dan Kerbein, chair of the Sonoma County chapter of the Sierra Club. "There are a lot of things in Wal-Mart's business model that are unsustainable."

Today's Planning Commission meeting at City Hall is likely just the first step in the renewed fight over Wal-Mart's plans. Whichever side prevails, the other is likely to appeal to the City Council. More lawsuits could follow.

Susan Adams, a planning commissioner, said she plans to vote in favor of the project.

"I don't see any reason why Wal-Mart should be denied the opportunity to expand their business in Rohnert Park," she said. "Opponents' concerns would carry more weight if they were consistently applied to businesses throughout the county."

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