



Voters to get initiative against Wal-Mart

Organizers say enough signatures qualify it for 2009 Ventura election

By Kevin Clerici
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Backers of an initiative aimed at blocking Wal-Mart or a large grocery store from opening in Ventura say they have collected enough signatures to put it before voters, and they have instructed supporters to stop gathering more to avoid a costly special election.

"We were told a special election could be as much as \$400,000 and we thought, Whoa, that's not good government," said Ed Lacey, a local attorney and spokesman for Livable Ventura, one of half a dozen citizen and union groups backing the measure. "We don't want to put the city and taxpayers in that spot."

The initiative would keep the world's largest retailer from opening in Ventura by banning any new store selling groceries that is larger than 90,000 square feet.

Big grocers could face special conditions if they decided to move into an existing but vacant store.

Proponents, who filed initiative papers in January, initially set their sights on the Nov. 4 election, hoping to strike before Wal-Mart tries to replace a shuttered Kmart on Victoria Avenue with a store of its own.

But a tight timeline — they needed 8,903 verified signatures by May — proved too demanding.

Relying on volunteers and paid gatherers, proponents say they now have collected more than 10,000 signatures, although some likely will be disqualified because they do not belong to registered voters in Ventura.

Supporters, however, are confident that they have more than the 5,936 signatures, or 10 percent of Ventura registered voters, needed to qualify for the next regular city election in November 2009.

That ballot will feature races for four seats on the City Council, among other items, at an estimated cost of \$125,000 because expenses are shared with the county, City Clerk Mabi Plisky said.

If supporters collected and submitted signatures from 15 percent of registered voters, the city could be required to hold a special election.

That could cost \$300,000, not counting necessary staff time, Plisky said.

A Wal-Mart spokesman called the effort disappointing and said the company's three other stores in the county — a Wal-Mart and Sam's Club in Oxnard and a Wal-Mart in Simi Valley — had more than 4

million visitors last year and generated some \$1.8 million in sales tax revenues for those communities.

Time to raise more money

The initiative's authors cast Wal-Mart as a "behemoth" with "predatory practices," and worry that it would hurt local businesses, add low-wage jobs in a community without affordable housing, worsen traffic and alter Ventura's reputation as a quaint beach town.

Proponents have instructed volunteers to stop all signature gathering this week. They plan to submit the signatures next week.

Waiting until next year's election allows supporters to raise more money, add to their army of volunteers and expand their education efforts, including more door-to-door campaigning, supporters said.

Forcing taxpayers to spend \$300,000 for a special election also could embolden their critics, who point to the potential windfall of sales tax revenue from a Wal-Mart store and the potential chilling effect that the measure could have on attracting other businesses.

"We don't want Ventura to have less (city) services because we forced a special election," supporter Das Williams said.

Coalition support

The initiative specifically targets large grocery stores but not all big-box outlets. Lacey said it would not ban a large electronics store like Fry's or Best Buy, or a department store.

The coalition supporting the measure includes the Tri-Counties Labor Foundation, United Food and Commercial Workers, the Stop Ventura Wal-Mart Coalition, Livable Ventura, Ventura County Working People's Alliance and the Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy.

The Ventura City Council voted in January to limit the size of multistory stores at the Kmart site and along Victoria Avenue to 100,000 square feet, despite pleas by the coalition to lower the number to 90,000 square feet.

Nontaxable grocery items

The proposed initiative would prohibit any new "super store" greater than 90,000 square feet that devotes more than 3 percent of its sales floor to nontaxable grocery items.

Companies wanting to use existing stores such as the Kmart site also could face greater scrutiny and possible conditions if it's proven that the new store would pay low wages, increase demand for affordable housing, add traffic and negatively affect other businesses.

Wal-Mart has not filed a formal application to replace the Kmart building, which it controls, but presented a conceptual plan to build a 150,000-square-foot store with groceries when it last met with city leaders.



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