



Inland News

Anxiously waiting on Wal-Mart

WILDOMAR CITYHOOD: The big-box retailer figures prominently in plans for generating tax revenue.



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At a time when Wal-Marts are sued and criticized by residents across the country, Wildomar cityhood proponents are opening their arms wide to the Arkansas-based conglomerate.

If built, a Wildomar supercenter could bring in an estimated \$500,000 a year in sales-tax revenue, money that could be needed to provide services to the proposed new city. Wildomar residents have been given approval to vote on incorporation as soon as Riverside County supervisors set an election date.

Not all residents are excited about accepting Wal-Mart. A group of neighbors doesn't want the 240,000-square-foot facility on property along Bundy Canyon Road near Interstate 15. Incorporation critics have called the Wal-Mart a red herring that will never be built because the company may bring supercenters to other Southwest Riverside County communities. "We do not want the community referred to as 'WaldoMart,' " resident Beryl Yasinovsky wrote in a letter to George Spiliotis, executive director of Riverside County's local boundary formation commission.

Cityhood proponents said Wal-Mart officials are serious about building but added the city could survive even if Wal-Mart passes on Wildomar.

"I am not sitting here fretting that it's all over for us if Wal-Mart doesn't come in," said Sheryl Ade, a member of Wildomar Incorporation Now. The citizens group paid for financial reports and promoted the cityhood vote.

The Supercenters

There have been rumors in southwest Riverside County that Wal-Mart Supercenters are planned for Wildomar, Temecula, Murrieta, Menifee and Lake Elsinore.

A Wal-Mart official would not comment on specific locations the retail giant may be considering but said the company is dedicated to Southwest Riverside County.

"We take each store on a site-by-site approach," said Wal-Mart spokesman John Mendez. "Our number one priority is providing convenience to our customers."

Riverside County Planning Director Ron Goldman has confirmed that Gatlin Development, a San Diego construction company, has submitted environmental plans for a large retail store along Bundy Canyon Road. The company is known for building Wal-Marts, county officials said.

They expect a public hearing to be held on the environmental documents within six months.

The Murrieta planning department also is reviewing plans for a Wal-Mart Supercenter project. The store would anchor the Westside Market Place shopping center near Jefferson and Monroe avenues, said Fred Grimes, general partner of the center's developer. He expects the center to open in 2009.

Big-Box Criticism

The proposed Wildomar supercenter was quietly talked about by residents until incorporation discussions started getting more serious. Cityhood proponents paid for a report to determine if the community would be financially feasible. The study examines the first 10 years of potential cityhood and shows expenses, revenues and the potential for survival.

Gary Thompson, who was hired to do the financial study, said at first he didn't include the actual Wal-Mart store but a generic similar-size store. He conservatively estimated that the community would bring in more than 600,000 square-feet of commercial businesses in the next decade, including a big-box retailer at the Bundy Canyon Road location.

The supercenter would account for approximately \$500,000 in sales-tax revenue if built, according to the financial reports.

Critics of the financial documents questioned the reliance of cityhood on a supercenter. Steve Beutz called the Wal-Mart project a ploy to get the cityhood issue to the ballot. Resident Martha Bridges questioned during a public hearing why Wal-Mart would build in Wildomar when they have other stores up and down I-15.

In her letter to Spiliotis, Yasinovsky said the use of the Wal-Mart project, "as the proverbial revenue 'flagship' for the fledgling city is impulsive and certainly premature."

Yasinovsky declined to comment further on her letter in a phone call last week.

'A Viable City'

Thompson said residents shouldn't be concerned if Wal-Mart scraps a plan to build because an incorporated city could still survive in the black for at least the first decade. "If you take Wal-Mart away from Wildomar you still have a viable city," he said.

Ade added that another retailer would likely take over at the site if Wal-Mart backs out. She also pointed to an exploding commercial corridor along Clinton Keith Road as signs that the city could thrive.

"We are not in competition with other cities for Wal-Mart," she said. "We can have one in Menifee, one in Wildomar. We don't have any problem with that because these are supercenters. People will be coming to the store to shop for groceries."

County Supervisor Bob Buster said he was initially skeptical about the proposal because of environmental issues such as drainage caused by a lack of infrastructure. But after talking with Wal-Mart representatives, he said his opinion has changed.

"It seems to me that they think this is a good location despite the serious issues," he said. "The I-15 corridor is the perfect place for any business to build."

Grimes, the developer of the Murrieta shopping center, said despite a supercenter planned for Murrieta, he heard from company officials that it does not prevent any other supercenters from being built.

"From my understanding they plan on building this (Murrieta) store," Grimes said. "Right now they are very active in Southwest Riverside County and are looking to expand that superstore format."

Wal-Mart spokesman Mendez also said Wal-Mart is active in Riverside County and is always looking for ways to provide more convenience to customers.

"We are committed to growth in this region," he added.

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