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Traffic, safety among top Walmart concerns

by James Leonard | Patterson Irrigator
11.10.09 - 10:41 am



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Traffic and safety were among the most common concerns cited about a proposed Walmart in 10 letters

written to the city in advance of the project's environmental review.

The letters came in response to a "notice of preparation" of a draft environmental impact report for the project, as required by the California Environmental Quality Act. Government agencies and members of the public were invited to weigh in with their concerns about the proposed store at the corner of Sperry and Ward avenues in writing or at a lightly attended public scoping meeting held last month.

During the 30-day comment period, the city received letters from residents living near the proposed site, the state's Public Utilities and Native American Heritage commissions and the local police chief.

City consultants will now look at the concerns raised in those letters and fold them into an exhaustive environmental review that will be subject to another public review period. That could be six to 12 months away, said Rod Simpson, the city's community development director.

After the EIR has been reviewed and revised, the project will then go before the Patterson Planning Commission and City Council for approval. Walmart hopes to open in Patterson by 2011.

Letters were received from three residents of the Seasons senior housing development in Patterson Gardens, which would sit behind the proposed Walmart, separated by a dividing wall along Las Palmas Avenue southwest of the intersection of Sperry and Ward.

The Seasons residents expressed concern over noise from delivery trucks and decreases in public safety and property values a Walmart might bring. They're also worried about increased traffic in the area, suggesting signal lights be added on Las Palmas at both Sperry and Ward and at Seasons Drive, along with stop signs in other spots nearby.

"I know that traffic signals represent a significant expense," Seasons resident Gary Seibel wrote. "But that (cost) should be borne by Walmart as one of their conditions for operating here, since they will be causing the increased traffic."

Also represented was the Miraggio housing development on the southeast corner of Sperry and Ward. A letter from its homeowners association made several requests to limit the impact a Walmart could have on the development — requests that included cautionary street signs, increased lighting, higher sound walls and a gated entrance.

Patterson Police Chief Tyrone Spencer penned a letter that focused primarily on security within Walmart and throughout the Patterson Plaza shopping center it's a part of. In addition to public safety, Spencer's letter also addressed the issues of noise and litter.

Simpson said the EIR might not address security quite to the depths requested by Spencer, which included questions about security cameras and personnel inside the store.

"Public safety issues are considered as part of an EIR," Simpson wrote in an e-mail, "but usually not to the level of detail of internal security unless there is significant evidence that it should be."

The Public Utilities Commission was primarily focused on railroads — specifically on safety concerns caused by increased traffic at rail crossings like those along Highway 33. The Native American Heritage Commission, meanwhile, emphasized that any cultural or archaeological resources on or under the proposed site must be handled appropriately, though Simpson said the site has gone through approvals before and likely won't have a problem there.

And Simpson said regardless of whether it was brought up by the public, the environmental review will include an "economic and urban decay" analysis, which will in part focus on the impact a Walmart would have on local businesses.

In addition to the letters of concern, two residents wrote to simply state their own approval of bringing a Walmart to Patterson.

"I look forward to having a shopping center in Patterson where I can purchase what I need or want instead of having to go to Turlock or Modesto," Patterson resident Barbara Applegate wrote.

- *Contact James Leonard at 892-6187 or james@pattersonirrigator.com.*

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