

Wal-Mart opponents heartened  
Appellate ruling, study boost hopes

By Kerry Cavanaugh, Staff Writer  
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NORTHRIDGE - Stymied in previous efforts to block plans for a Wal-Mart, neighbors hope to use a recent state Court of Appeal ruling and new environmental studies to derail the controversial project.

Residents fear the 156,000-square-foot store proposed for Nordhoff Street and Tampa Avenue - across from Northridge Fashion Center - will trigger massive traffic jams in an already congested area and put some retailers out of business.

Critics also note that Wal-Mart already operates three stores within seven miles of the site and question the need for another.

"We have a Kmart. We have a Costco. We have the mall right there. We feel like this is just being shoved down our throats," said James Seager, a Northridge resident and Wal-Mart shopper.

Wal-Mart regional spokesman Eric Berger said the company needs the new store, to serve customers better, and doesn't have plans to close any of its stores in the area.

In response to community concerns, Wal-Mart officials say they would reduce proposed operating hours from 24 to 15 hours per day and bar recreational vehicles from camping in the parking lot.

They also plan to add turn lanes to alleviate congestion in the area.

"We've received input and have been able to work with them on a compromise on an overall development that's better for the community."

When the store was first proposed last year, residents hoped the city would block it. But officials said the zoning that allowed the former Best and Levitz stores on the site also allows a Wal-Mart.

The opposition group, called Citizens to Preserve Northridge, and its attorney, John G. McClendon, have now pinned their hopes on a recent decision by the state's 5th District Court of Appeal that required cities and Wal-Mart to study the potential economic impact of the discount store on surrounding businesses.

"There's going to be closures. The only way Wal-Mart is going to get market share with its new store is to cannibalize off other retailers," McClendon said. "What are those particular shopping centers that are liable? Do we weaken our mall across the street?"

In addition, Citizens to Preserve Northridge commissioned a study that found Wal-Mart had underestimated potential afternoon traffic by roughly 40 percent.

In response, Councilman Greig Smith last week asked the City Planning Department to order a lengthy environmental impact report that would include studies on traffic and the potential for urban decay.

The department is expected to decide on that request this month.

"Hopefully, something will come out that says we can't put the Wal-Mart there," said Mitchell Englander, Smith's chief of staff.

Neighborhood activists have collected 1,000 signatures to oppose the Wal-Mart and intend to fight the project in court, said Jim Alger, president of the Northridge West Neighborhood Council and part of the Citizens to Preserve Northridge.

Alger said the group's complaint is not with Wal-Mart, but the location. Nonetheless, he has asked the United Food and Commercial Workers' Wake Up Wal-Mart campaign for financial help if necessary. The labor group has tried unsuccessfully to unionize Wal-Mart workers.

"My belief is this project is beatable. I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't think we could win," Alger said.