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Wal-Mart Pulls the Plug on Valley Site

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Retail behemoth Wal-Mart has dropped its plans to open a store in Northridge after deciding it did not want to conduct a lengthy environmental impact report demanded by neighbors and city officials.

Arkansas-based Wal-Mart Stores Inc. has been trying for a year to open a store in an existing building at Nordhoff Street and Tampa Avenue. Officials said that an environmental study for the more than 150,000-square-foot store in the San Fernando Valley would have been too costly and would have delayed the project by at least several months.

"The time it took to do the environmental impact report added to the time it would take to start construction and the economics of maintaining the land while going through this process was a factor," said Kevin McCall, spokesman for Wal-Mart in Southern California.

Two other Wal-Mart stores, in West Hills and Porter Ranch, are within several miles of the site. McCall said the purpose of the new store was to alleviate long lines at those two locations.

But the plan met with strong resistance from nearby residents and Los Angeles City Councilman Greig Smith, whose 12th District includes Northridge.

Wal-Mart "explained to me through their intermediary that as they analyzed this further, it wasn't worth it for them to go forward," Smith said. "It was surprising. I thought it was a foregone conclusion."

Residents and activists, who sometimes sparred with Smith over his commitment to opposing the project, applauded the retailer's decision.

"I'm not surprised that we won, I'm just surprised that Wal-Mart went this fast," said Jim Alger, president of the Northridge West Neighborhood Council. "This is what I think it came down to: The environment impact report had to include alternative uses for the property that have a less significant impact on the community."

Wal-Mart has had its share of success in Southern California, operating five stores in Los Angeles. But increasingly it has run into opposition from communities whose concerns about the company include its salary and benefit plans for employees and its effect on local businesses.

The Northridge project was unusual because Wal-Mart was moving into an existing building already zoned for large retail purposes. Also, Wal-Mart was not proposing to turn the store into a so-called supercenter, which sells groceries.

But the new store would have been surrounded by other businesses. Northridge Fashion Center is across the street and restaurants and retail strip centers abound.

That, combined with the store's location at an already busy intersection, was apparently the tipping point.

"I'm very pro-business, but for me, it was the wrong business in the wrong place" because of traffic, Smith said.

One city report suggested that a Wal-Mart store would have put an extra 5,000 cars on nearby streets each day.

McCall, the Wal-Mart spokesman, said his company would continue to seek potential sites in Los Angeles.

"We are always looking on how to best serve the community," he said. "We believe the Valley is a wonderful opportunity for retail, and we're always looking."