

New Wal-Mart draws mixed reaction

Residents fear the retailer will have an impact on the quality of city services received.

By KEVIN GRAHAM

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TEMPLE TERRACE - Doris Sempert lives on a fixed income and less than 3 miles from the proposed site of a Wal-Mart Supercenter just outside Temple Terrace.

She can't understand why surrounding residents don't want the store in their neighborhood.

"At \$3-plus-a-gallon for gas, any time you can shop closer to home is a good thing," she said.

On the other hand, Rod Jurado says he and his wife, Mel, have nothing against Wal-Mart. But he fears that allowing the retail giant to move in would cause the quality of the city's services to its residents, like police and fire response time, to diminish.

A mutual aid report by the city shows that the Temple Terrace Fire Department has responded a total of 645 times in the past 12 months to help out Hillsborough and Tampa Fire Rescue, which in turn have only responded to Temple Terrace a total of 150 times during the same period.

Since Jan. 1, the Temple Terrace Police Department has only responded once to assist Tampa police and once to assist the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, according to the city.

"Wal-Mart is not a bad citizen," Jurado said. "But they're a big resource that's going to suck energy from Temple Terrace.

City Council members don't know what to think.

"It's almost a dead heat whether it should be or shouldn't be," council member Ron Govin said during a recent meeting. "We have a divided community on whether this is a plan to go forward with."

Hillsborough County commissioners ultimately will decide.

But first, the citizens and Wal-Mart representatives get to argue their cases before a county zoning hearing master on Monday.

The county asked Temple Terrace to weigh in on the issue even though the store would sit outside the city's jurisdiction. Wal-Mart, however, would receive its water and sewer services from Temple Terrace, a service the city says it can capably accommodate.

City Council members voted against sending a report to the county that included a flat-out recommendation to deny Wal-Mart, a move that was proposed by the city's staff.

Instead, the city's report merely outlined the city's concerns about "potential negative impacts" if Wal-Mart gets a green light to build a 216,000-square-foot Supercenter on 34.37 acres that front both Temple Terrace Highway and Harney Road, west of U.S. 301.

"It's positive that they didn't recommend to deny it," said Eric Brewer, community affairs manager for Wal-Mart. "Most people in Temple Terrace leave Temple Terrace to buy the things we stock. We'd like to keep them there."

Susanne Hicks, senior planner for Temple Terrace, outlined negative impacts in three "matters of vital importance" to the city in an analysis:

- The city's existing and planned commercial areas, including plans for redevelopment of N 56th Street, would suffer.
- The Supercenter would increase traffic on city roads and strategic intersections.
- The store would negatively affect the city's capacity to provide services and guide future development at its eastern boundaries.

Hicks' report said the Wal-Mart development "threatens to overtake the city's primary redevelopment focus" and that the downtown retail district is already at a competitive disadvantage.

But Brewer responds that Wal-Mart has offered to help bolster Temple Terrace's redevelopment plans. The store wants to place a kiosk for the city inside the Supercenter that informs shoppers about events and retail stores in the city's downtown area.

Brewer said the products offered by Wal-Mart and the ones at traditional retail stores "have very little overlap."

Council member Glenda Venable said the city has enough in the way of stores. She was the only council member to vote against taking out a "no" recommendation in the city's report to the county.

"We have enough flea markets on Nebraska and Fowler," she told the council. "One less wouldn't hurt."

Council member Frank Chillura said he welcomed more competition to the area but couldn't decide whether to endorse the Supercenter.

"The real war to oppose it or to support it, if you're in favor of it, is to be in front of the hearing master of Hillsborough County," he said.

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IF YOU GO

That meeting begins at 6 p.m. Monday on the second floor of the County Center at 601 E Kennedy Blvd. For more information about the rezoning hearing, call 276-2058.