

Crowd Stays Late To Comment On Wal-Mart Rezoning

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TEMPLE - TERRACE -- Residents will know by Nov. 7 if a Wal-Mart rezoning application has cleared its first hurdle.

About 50 residents from Temple Terrace and the surrounding area packed into a hearing at the Fred B. Karl County Center at 6 p.m. Monday. They came to speak about a proposed 216,000-square-foot Wal-Mart Supercenter on Temple Terrace Highway near Harney and Davis roads.

At 11:15 p.m., roughly 30 of the weary residents remained when a zoning hearing master announced it was time to review the application. What followed was a spirited debate with testimony from Wal-Mart representatives and proponents and opponents of the project.

The hearing continued well past the county's self-imposed midnight deadline. It ended with Wal-Mart attorney Jim Porter raising questions about the motives of Temple Terrace city staff and elected leaders.

He referred to statements during the hearing by Community Services Director Ralph Bosek, Mayor Joe Affronti and Councilwoman Glenda Venable. Affronti and Venable said they spoke as private citizens.

Bosek, who spoke as a city staff member, said Wal-Mart "threatens to overtake the redevelopment process" in Temple Terrace. He predicted "increased accidents will be tremendous" because thousands more vehicles will travel on overburdened city streets.

"The voters in Temple Terrace defeated the revitalization effort. This is a divided community about this issue of Wal-Mart," Porter said. "Mr. Bosek seems to be confused about which jurisdiction we're in here. There was not one wit of competent, substantial testimony presented here tonight."

The Temple Terrace City Council voted 4-1, with Venable as the holdout, not to weigh in about the proposed store after being asked to do so by the county. Instead, the council forwarded a city staff report to the county outlining concerns, but did not include the staff's recommendation to deny the application. The site of the proposed Wal-Mart is not within the Temple Terrace city limits, but nearby in unincorporated Hillsborough County. The site is within the Temple Terrace water and sewer service area, however.

"This is the second time Wal-Mart has petitioned to build a store in the city of Temple Terrace (sic). In 1999, it was turned down by city council," Venable told the hearing master. "Davis Road, which is a main thoroughfare, has 17 school buses carrying 400 students on that road every day. According to the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, from Oct. 1, 2004, to Sept. 30, 2005, there were 54 major traffic accidents there."

Concerns voiced by the 10 people who spoke against the store centered on traffic, crime and changing community character. A county Planning Commission report found a Wal-Mart would be inconsistent with the area's character and comprehensive plan.

John Graves, whose family has owned 5 acres nearby for 50 years, opposes Wal-Mart: "One of the things I don't really understand is how you let big money come into an area like this and take it over."

Four people spoke in favor of the store, including Sam Tallent, whose garage is 13 feet from Wal-Mart's proposed property line. He is more worried about hundreds of homes being built on the property.

"I have witnessed every change in the community, and I am not naive about what will happen in the future," he said. "The choice I have is between having a super Wal-Mart next door and 1,000 neighbors."

Among those divided on the store was Dale McClellan, a farmer on Harney Road.

"I'm truly not on either side. I am on my family's side. My kids represent the fourth generation," he said.
"Take into consideration that Wal-Mart or something like Wal-Mart doesn't go there, most of the people that buy houses next to dairy farms don't know it until about three weeks after they have gotten their mortgage."

The hearing master has until Nov. 7 to make a recommendation to Hillsborough County commissioners, who are expected to review the application in December.