

## **A Wal-Mart in the neighborhood? Inglewood goes to polls to decide**

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Tuesday, April 6, 2004

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Wal-Mart faces a crucial test today in its fight against local officials who want to block the world's largest retailer from expanding its empire of discount stores in California.

Voters in Inglewood (Los Angeles County) will decide whether to approve an ordinance placed on the ballot by Wal-Mart to allow it to build a department store near the Forum, where the Los Angeles Lakers used to play.

The measure -- which was written by the Bentonville, Ark., retailer -- would allow the company to build its 130,000-square foot store as part of a 60-acre shopping center. The project would not undergo normal state environmental review.

The \$1 million ballot campaign is the most aggressive move yet by Wal-Mart to thwart efforts to block its department stores or Supercenters, which are retail outlets and grocery stores.

"This is the first time to my knowledge Wal-Mart has run an initiative like this," said Paul Shigley, editor of the California Planning and Development Report. "It's an escalation or new phase in what Wal-Mart has done previously. For that reason a lot of people are watching it."

Bob McAdam, Wal-Mart's vice president of corporate affairs, admitted it was rare for the retailer to use an initiative but said the City Council's refusal to approve the project made it necessary.

"The proposal complies with or exceeds every part of Inglewood city code," McAdam said. "There's nothing here the people in Inglewood should fear. (The measure) just

doesn't let the City Council turn it down."

So far, Wal-Mart has a nearly flawless record in defeating local efforts to block its stores and Supercenters, the first of which in California opened in Riverside County in March.

Also in March, Contra Costa County voters sided with the retailer and rescinded a countywide ban on Supercenters, which are close to 200,000 square feet.

The company did lose two referendums over siting of its smaller outlets - - one in Eureka and more recently one in San Marcos in San Diego County.

The company hopes to open 40 of the giant stores in California over the next three to five years. McAdam said the company did not know how many of the stores would be in Northern California. There are 1,500 Supercenters across the country.

If Wal-Mart succeeds in Inglewood, it will have a powerful tool to use against opponents of future stores.

The threat of proliferating Supercenters sparked a 138-day strike in Southern California when union supermarket employees picketed proposed cuts in health benefits. The supermarket chains said they needed to reduce overhead to compete with the nonunion Wal-Mart.

Unions oppose the giant retailer because they say employees are paid less and have less generous benefits, allowing the Wal-Mart to undercut other retailers. Wal-Mart officials say they offer competitive compensation for workers and low prices for consumers.

Inglewood, a city of 121,000 people, has been tussling with Wal-Mart for 18 months over siting of a Supercenter.

In October 2002, the City Council effectively blocked a Supercenter by banning stores of over 155,000 square feet that sell more than 20,000 nontaxable items, such as food.

Similar so-called anti-"big box" ordinances have passed in Turlock (Stanislaus County), Santa Maria (Santa Barbara County) and Oakland, among other places. In March, Wal-Mart succeeded in defeating a similar ban in Calexico in Imperial County.

In Inglewood, Wal-Mart first tried to do the same thing -- gather enough signatures for a referendum. It also threatened a lawsuit.

The council backed down and rescinded the ban.

Angry, the United Food and Commercial Workers union, which represents grocery employees, helped elect a new member to the council.

Rather than risk another ban, Wal-Mart qualified a 71-page initiative that would create the "Home Stretch at Hollywood Park" shopping center, of which Wal-Mart would be a part, next to the racetrack of the same name.

Without a public hearing, the city's general plan would be changed to allow for the center. The project would be exempt from environmental review and any city oversight, according to the city's impartial analysis of the measure.

Opponents say that's a chief reason for their opposition.

"The measure is a detailed planning outline that exempts the project from the normal permit process," said Altagarcia Perez, rector of the Holy Faith Episcopal Church and a member of the Coalition for a Better Inglewood, which has also filed a lawsuit that challenged Wal-Mart's ballot measure. "It rezones the area without community input and without input from the government. The question isn't whether to have Supercenter but whether we're going to give up our rights."

In commercials and mailers, the nearly \$260 billion in revenue corporation portrays the project being "good news for everyone in Inglewood."

Of the five members of the City Council, only Mayor Roosevelt Dorn favors the project, arguing that it will create 1,500 permanent jobs in a city eager for an economic boost.

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