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Wal-Mart Turns To Voters for OK On a Supercenter

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In a vote that could set a precedent for how **Wal-Mart Stores Inc.** deals with hostile city governments, voters in Inglewood, Calif., went to the polls to decide whether to let the retailer build a combination grocery and merchandise store.

If Inglewood voters approve the store, Wal-Mart could build a supercenter without submitting to environmental reviews, traffic studies and public hearings.

Across the country, the world's largest retailer has faced opposition from union activists, environmentalists and community groups, which accuse it of hurting local stores, paying poor wages and increasing traffic. The battles have grown fiercer since Wal-Mart announced plans last year to gain a piece of the lucrative grocery business in California by building 40 superstores in five years.

Wal-Mart's supercenter expansion into California was at the heart of a bitter four-month grocery strike there. Supermarket chains asked their unions to make benefit concessions so the companies could better compete with the low prices offered by nonunion Wal-Mart.

So far, Wal-Mart has opened only one California supercenter, a 225,000-square-foot store in La Quinta. Meanwhile, more than a half-dozen other communities have enacted ordinances that ban stores of more than 100,000 square feet from deriving a certain percentage of sales from groceries, effectively closing Wal-Mart out.

Wal-Mart has been fighting back. It helped defeat a supercenter ban in Contra Costa County in March and filed suit in Alameda County Superior Court to overturn a law there barring supercenters.

In Inglewood, a small, primarily African-American suburb of Los Angeles, Wal-Mart for the first time went straight to the voters. The ballot proposal is the byproduct of California's unique initiative process,

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which has allowed voters to slash property taxes and oust Gov. Gray Davis.

The Inglewood City Council, concerned about low-wage jobs, passed a supercenter ban last year. The city rescinded the ban after Wal-Mart collected more than 10,000 signatures to place the referendum on the ballot. When two union officials were elected to the council on an anti-Wal-Mart platform, the retailer decided it would do better with citizens.

Inglewood voters exiting the polls cited various reasons for opposing Wal-Mart's proposal, including traffic, threats to small business, an abundance of shopping options, perceived racial discrimination at Wal-Mart and a preference for development that would bring in higher-wage jobs. A theme in most of their arguments was distrust for the process that the company is going through to get its project approved.

"They are trying to bypass us, bypass our elected city council, bypass legitimate opposition, bypass the normal development process and buy enough votes to let them do whatever they want to do to make money," said Willy Jordan, 62 years old. "We welcome business," Mr. Jordan said, "but our community is not for sale to the highest bidder."

Wal-Mart says its Inglewood proposal was created with the city planning department and surpasses city codes. If it prevails with citizens, it says it could go to other California voters, but that isn't likely. "It is still more beneficial for us to work through city councils," said Robert McAdam, Wal-Mart's vice president for local and state government relations.

In neighboring Los Angeles, where the city attorney is drafting an antisupercenter ordinance that will go before the city council within the next several months, Wal-Mart's opponents remain steadfast. "Whatever the outcome is in Inglewood, it won't change anything that is happening here in the city of Los Angeles," said Los Angeles Councilman Eric Garcetti, who has led the city's fight against supercenters.

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