

Ventura OKs moratorium on stores

Victoria Avenue ban includes proposed site for Wal-Mart

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The Ventura City Council on Monday approved a yearlong moratorium on new commercial stores along a seven-block stretch of Victoria Avenue, effectively rejecting an application by Wal-Mart Stores Inc. to bring one of its discount stores to the busy thoroughfare.

The ban, approved in a 5-2 vote, would give the city staff up to a year to draft a clear set of directions to developers that essentially would demand a mix of small-scale, local-serving businesses and housing along the commercial corridor.

The opponents — Councilmen Neal Andrews and Jim Monahan — said the moratorium was misguided, would penalize area businesses and dances around the Wal-Mart issue.

Wal-Mart, the world's largest retailer, has applied to demolish most of an existing 124,000-square-foot Kmart building on South Victoria Avenue and replace it with a slightly smaller discount store. Kmart still has an 18-month lease, Andrews said, another reason he felt that the yearlong moratorium was unnecessary.

Proponents called the ban "visionary" and contended that it would help reclaim a traffic-choked artery between Highways 101 and 126 with a mix of development that meets the city's newly adopted and citizen-backed vision.

City Manager Rick Cole, who largely authored the ban, said Wal-Mart has indicated that it may be willing to alter its proposal to the new guidelines.

"We are prohibiting big, ugly, boxy buildings surrounded by big, ugly parking lots," Councilwoman Christy Weir said. "We're not prohibiting the businesses that use them."

A second reading of the ban is scheduled Feb. 6. If approved, it would take effect March 8 and expire Jan. 31, 2007.

Today, mostly retail, government and office uses front Victoria Avenue. Some 50,000 vehicles traverse the six-lane corridor daily.

An aide to state Assemblyman Pedro Nava, D-Santa Barbara, read a statement supporting the moratorium.

Steve Doll, board chairman of the Ventura Chamber of Commerce, and a handful of local business owners, spoke in opposition to the temporary ban, believed to be the third imposed by the city in the last decade.

Greg Martin of Mideb Nominees Inc. of Los Angeles, which has owned the shopping center with Kmart since the 1970s and has negotiated a lease with Wal-Mart, opposed the proposal.

He complained that it was a "heavy-handed instrument" simply to block Wal-Mart and would unfairly demand him to shoehorn housing into the site "no matter how infeasible it may be."

"There is no reason to hold all of Victoria hostage when you are after my property," he said.