



BIG BOXED OUT

In another local battle over Wal-Mart, the city of Rosemead sidesteps community outrage

By [Bobbi Murray](#)

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A citizens' move to block the construction of a Wal-Mart had put the pro-business Rosemead City Council between a rock and a hard place, but on Tuesday night they managed to extricate themselves in one smooth slither. It was yet another strange twist in a series of ongoing local battles to keep Wal-Mart out of Southern California communities.

Inglewood defeated a Wal-Mart plan early in 2004. And opponents to a planned Wal-Mart Supercenter in the city of Rosemead, 10 miles east of downtown Los Angeles, showed up at city hall virtually dead certain that they had wrestled the five-member council into an untenable position, one that would force them to reject the construction of a 215,000 square foot store adjacent to a residential community. But by then the council had figured out a way to keep their Wal-Mart.

Rosemead council members had bucked noisy public opposition in September to vote 5-0 in favor of a development agreement with Wal-Mart. The homegrown grassroots group Save Our Community, angry at the prospect of the 7,500-to-10,000 cars and some 100 delivery trucks a day rolling through their neighborhoods to Wal-Mart, painstakingly gathered some 2,600 signatures to qualify a referendum for the local ballot and force the council to rescind the September vote.

The council seemed to have few options: If the council failed to rescind, they would either have to schedule a special election on the referendum, at a cost to taxpayers of some \$35,000 - sure to be unpopular - or place the question on a March 2007 ballot, alongside the names of three of the council members who had approved the deal, all up for reelection. It's infinitely easier to get a "no" vote than a "yes" on a referendum, and voters inclined to reject the Wal-Mart Supercenter idea might be similarly inclined to dump the city officials that okayed the plan.

But that's not how it all happened. Instead, the council stunned the standing-room only crowd with the news that rescinding the September ordinance would not bar Wal-Mart from building, but only change one part of the agreement, one that would have allowed the company to develop the site over 10 years. During a meeting after the high-profile vote in September, the council had approved an amendment to the general plan that permits the Wal-Mart development. The time period to challenge the amendment has expired.

Council members went on to bait the furious crowd, repeatedly asking Save Our Community how they could have gotten it wrong. How could they think that the 2,600 signatures they collected to rescind the development ordinance would scuttle the Wal-Mart project? Mayor Margaret Clark claimed that she didn't know herself that the referendum wouldn't stop the development until after the signatures were submitted. She nonetheless demanded of the protesters, "Why wasn't there an investigation of how to stop the project?" The question met with angry shouts from the audience, "If you didn't know it, how are residents supposed to know?" "You're supposed to be a leader!" And "Are you proud of what you're doing here, Maggie?"

Other council members were singled out for having family members employed by Wal-Mart and the Wal-Mart-owned Sam's Club.

Wal-Mart representative Chris Stamos, who had arrived early Tuesday morning from the company's Bentonville, Arkansas, headquarters, stood quietly on the sidelines. Yes, he said in an interview, Wal-Mart representatives had seen the fruitless petition as it was being circulated. "We knew what they were asking for," he said.

State Senator Gloria Romero, a long-time opponent of the planned superstore in her district, sat through the meeting in the front row, and was outraged. "This is the most incredible display of arrogance that I think I have ever witnessed in California," she exclaimed. This is also an ongoing issue, as the world's largest retailer has plans to build 40 immense supercenters in the state. Save Our Community's opposition is largely centered on sprawl and traffic, but the nation's biggest employer often also draws fire on the labor front.

Wal-Mart is the target of a class action suit alleging that men are routinely promoted over women, and has a reputation for strenuous union suppression that goes with low-wage jobs and few benefits. The company boasts that some 90 percent of its workers have health coverage, but a closer look reveals that about 40 percent are actually covered by the plans of spouses, parents, or programs like MediCal or MediCare. The company plan also has high deductibles and excludes coverage of such routine maintenance services as vaccinations.

The present fracas in Rosemead began in the spring, shortly after the drubbing the company took in Inglewood in April, when Wal-Mart, using paid signature gatherers, had a "Welcome Wal-Mart to Inglewood" measure put on the ballot. The initiative would have permitted the construction of a supercenter the size of 17 football fields while bypassing such local oversight niceties as public hearings and traffic and environmental impact studies. A local coalition of labor, religious, and community groups, aided by an 11th-hour, \$100,000-plus assist from the County Federation of Labor, was able to beat the initiative despite being outspent 10-to-1.

The California cities of Oakland and Turlock voted to ban big box stores; Wal-Mart took Turlock to court, where a decision is still pending, which will likely affect the company's next move, if any, in Oakland. But in a state known to some as the land of the ballot proposition, local ordinances to block stores like Wal-Mart are likely to be "referendized" by the company - that is, turned into an initiative for voter approval - a

tactic that puts banning advocates on the defensive. Wal-Mart gains the advantage when voters have to say "yes" to a big-box ban because it's so much easier to elicit a "no."

The Board of Supervisors in Contra Costa County learned that very lesson after it voted to ban big-box development in 2003. Wal-Mart paid signature gatherers \$10 an hour - more than it pays most of its employees - to collect 27,000 signatures to put a measure before Contra Costa County voters in March, 2004. It required a "yes" vote to uphold the big-box ban. Grocery union workers, threatened by Wal-Mart, joined the fight, but Wal-Mart outspent them and won the ballot measure.

The concept of simply banning big-box development has come under increasing scrutiny within the national movement of activists concerned with local control over development. The Los Angeles City Council had been contemplating a ban earlier this year but modified it to require potential big-box developers to pay for a study of the projected economic impact of locating a store in a given area. City officials will be able to review the information and decide on a case-by-case basis, rather than simply ban the big stores.

In Chicago last year, community activists waged a vigorous campaign to pass an ordinance that said Wal-Mart - or any other big box - could come in, but would be required to pay \$10 an hour and provide \$3-an-hour worth of benefits, hire locally, and permit employees to discuss working conditions. That might explain why Wal-Mart backed off on plans for a store on the city's south side.

Rosemead activists are reviewing their options in the wake of Tuesday's reversal of fortune. They already have one legal challenge to the plan, and can add more, said Save Our Community's Larry Bevington. Wal-Mart is evidently pretty keen on building there. "It's a great business opportunity for us," the company's Chris Stamos said. He added that Rosemead is mid-point between the stores in Buena Park and Pico Rivera, and the company "pulled the point-of-sale data." Many of the zip codes, he said, track back to Rosemead.

But Save Our Community activist Ron Gay remained unfazed. "There's no way we're going anywhere," he said after the council meeting. "This is a good fight."

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