Community coalition balks at big-box rules; Plan would require economic impact analysis before getting approval

San Diego Union-Tribune - Thursday, October 7, 2010
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A proposal that would provide additional scrutiny for big-box stores that wish to sell groceries was shot down by a coalition of neighborhood planners.

The Community Planners Committee last week voted 14-12 against a draft ordinance that would require supercenters to prepare an economic impact analysis to determine whether their projects would harm surrounding neighborhoods and businesses.

Councilman Todd Gloria's proposal comes three years after a City Council vote to ban big-box retailers with full-service groceries was vetoed by Mayor Jerry Sanders. Gloria said he was trying to garner community support for the new measure before taking it to the full council.

The intent of the ordinance is to educate planning commissioners and the council about the financial impacts of proposed supercenters on neighborhoods, Gloria said. Ninety-two percent of businesses in San Diego are classified as small, and the city spends more than $1 million annually to stimulate growth and revitalize business districts, he said.

"It seems as if we often work at cross-purposes when we permit large-box retailers at the same time that we're trying to promote small businesses," Gloria said. "This is in no way a ban, and it is not targeted to any one retailer. It is simply an opportunity to provide more information to decision makers on the impacts of development."

Patrick Edwards, president of the San Diego Business Improvement District Council, said it took 40 years for North Park to recover after Mission Valley became a shopping destination.

"It scares me that a company can come in like Walmart with their funding and take away the character of my neighborhood overnight," Edwards said. "When they're done, they walk away from it, and what's left? How could you rebuild a city? We're all under attack here."

But critics say the proposed ordinance is an attempt to kowtow to unions, particularly because there are no known supercenter applications on file with the city. Aaron Rios, a spokesman for Walmart, called it a "thinly-veiled effort to restrict grocery options and consumer shopping choices in San Diego that's promoted by special interests."

"The residents of San Diego spoke loud and clear in 2007 and they were opposed to efforts by government officials to dictate how and where they should shop," Rios told the
committee. "While the city is facing double-digit unemployment and historic budget deficits, this measure will only stand in the way of opportunities to generate new tax revenue and stimulate local economic development."

A supercenter is defined as a big-box retailer with more than 90,000 square feet and more than 10 percent of floor space dedicated to nontaxable items such as groceries and prescription drugs, according to the draft ordinance. Large stores requiring memberships would be exempt.

Jim Varnadore, chairman of the City Heights Area Planning Committee, said the proposal was problematic for communities where residents are struggling financially and need as many affordable options as possible.

"I would like to see this whole thing simply dropped, left alone," Varnadore said.

Guy Preuss, representing Skyline-Paradise Hills, said as a retiree whose annual income is $18,000, big-box stores have been his saving grace.

"I would be naked if it wasn't for Walmart," Preuss said. "Everything I am wearing tonight, as most days of the week, I bought at Walmart."

An economic analysis would require assessing the number of jobs that would be created and displaced by a supercenter. It also would include a traffic study and how the store would affect wages and benefits.

The Community Planners Committee, tasked with addressing citywide planning and land-use issues, consists of one representative from each of the city's neighborhood planning groups. Members serve in an advisory capacity to the San Diego Planning Commission and City Council.

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Edition: City, East
Section: Zones
Page: CZ-1 EZ-6
Index Terms: CITY
Dateline: KEARNY MESA
Record Number: UTS2178599
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Full-text obtained via NewsBank