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Voters in Los Angeles Suburb Say No to a Big Wal-Mart

By JOHN M. BRODER

INGLEWOOD, Calif., April 7 — Voters in Inglewood, a racially diverse working-class suburb of Los Angeles, have soundly rejected a ballot initiative to permit the building of a 60-acre Wal-Mart shopping complex exempt from virtually all state and local regulation.

Its defeat at the polls on Tuesday may portend difficult battles ahead for Wal-Mart as it moves forward with plans to build 40 so-called supercenters in California, combining Wal-Mart's usual assortment of goods with large grocery departments on as much as 200,000 square feet of floor space. The Los Angeles City Council is preparing an ordinance that would in essence outlaw the building of such retail behemoths within the city limits, and several other California cities, including San Diego, are considering measures.

The Inglewood vote against Wal-Mart, 60 percent to 40 percent, was a victory for a coalition of unions, churches and community groups who said the development would have driven local retailers out of business and gutted the city's legal, environmental and planning powers.

Wal-Mart spent more than \$1 million to promote the initiative, which the company put on the ballot after local officials rejected the proposed development last year. The vote was closely watched around the nation as a test of Wal-Mart's ability to sway public opinion and influence political bodies as the company continues its move from rural and small-town America into its largest cities.

Opponents cheered their victory, depicting it as a triumph of David over Goliath. Wal-Mart, with annual sales of more than \$250 billion and more than 1.3 million employees, is the world's largest retailer. Inglewood is a city of about 113,000 people, roughly half black and half Latino. An estimated 10,000 households are headed by union members.

"I think that it means that Wal-Mart has to go through the front door and deal with cities and communities as equals," said Madeline Janis-Aparicio, leader of the Coalition for a Better Inglewood, a group formed to fight the Wal-Mart project. "They can't trick cities and communities into giving away the store, getting everything they want without any oversight. They're going to have to do business differently if they want to do business in California."

The Rev. Altagracia Perez, rector of the Holy Faith Episcopal Church in Inglewood, said that while many of her parishioners did not oppose the building of a Wal-Mart store in their neighborhood, they objected to the way the company tried to circumvent local officials by taking the matter directly to the ballot.

"They voted no because they didn't want to give up their property, their rights and their processes," Ms. Perez said.

Bob McAdam, vice president of corporate affairs at Wal-Mart, said the company regretted the outcome of the vote but said it would not deter the company from pursuing its expansion plans in California and elsewhere. Mr. McAdam said that Inglewood's opposition to the development was largely inspired and financed by organized labor, which opposes the company's anti-union policies and relatively low wages. Inglewood's four city council members all opposed the Wal-Mart plan and were among the leaders of the drive to stop it. The Los Angeles affiliate of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. spent about \$110,000 to defeat Wal-Mart at the polls.

"We are disappointed that a small group of Inglewood leaders together with representatives of outside special interests were able to convince a majority of Inglewood voters that they don't deserve the job opportunities and shopping choices that others in the L.A. area enjoy," Mr. McAdam said.

"Throughout the campaign we said this is just about one store in Inglewood," Mr. McAdam added. "If we win, that's all it means. If we lose, it will have no implications beyond that. We're still going to meet our goal of building the stores we predicted we'd build."

He said the company had not decided whether it would return to Inglewood city officials with a revised plan for the 60-acre site near the Hollywood Park race track, or simply move on to its next project.

Jerome E. Horton, a Democratic member of the California Assembly who represents Inglewood and adjoining areas, said that the vote was a referendum on the ability of a large corporation to win exemption from local zoning and planning laws.

"The question was whether the wealthiest company in the world could circumvent the law," Mr. Horton said at a small victory rally for the anti-Wal-Mart forces at the Inglewood city hall on Wednesday morning. "The answer was no."

He said local leaders were willing to consider a new proposal from Wal-Mart to put a store in Inglewood. "We're prepared to negotiate, we're prepared to work with you," Mr. Horton said. "But you have to comply with the laws of California."

Mr. Horton is sponsoring legislation that would prevent companies from seeking to bypass state environmental review by sponsoring a ballot initiative, as Wal-Mart did in Inglewood.

Having won in Inglewood, Los Angeles labor leaders are preparing for a broader contest with Wal-Mart across Southern California. Miguel Contreras, secretary treasurer of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, A.F.L.-C.I.O., said that he expected Wal-Mart to oppose the Los Angeles ordinance banning so-called big box stores and to spend freely to win the right to put stores in the city and other urban centers. Unions from across the country will band together to oppose the Wal-Mart expansion strategy, he said.

"It will become the battle royal for all of organized labor in the United States," Mr. Contreras said. "It will be where labor makes its stand."

But even all of organized labor's muscle and money may not be enough to stop the Wal-Mart juggernaut, said Kenneth E. Stone, emeritus professor of economics at Iowa State University, who has written frequently on the Wal-Mart phenomenon. He said the victory celebration of Wal-Mart opponents in Inglewood was likely to be short-lived.

"They're not about to quit," Professor Stone said of Wal-Mart executives. "They may move into a

neighboring area and make Inglewood merchants and city officials sorry they turned them away. That's happened elsewhere."

He added that Wal-Mart has shown time and again that it does not back down in the face of local roadblocks or union opposition.

"This is the biggest company in the world, he said, "and they desperately want to be in urban centers."

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