Lathrop poultry farm plans perched

By Neil Gonzales, staff writer
Stockton Record, Friday, May 5, 2006

An official for the 11,000-unit River Islands development in Lathrop was smelling roses Thursday night when San Joaquin County planning commissioners held off voting on a large poultry farm proposed near the master-planned community.

Commissioners continued the matter indefinitely after county planners received a last-minute letter from pollution police asking that the project by San Jose-based Olivera Family Partnership undergo a study to determine its potential health risks.

"It's great," said Susan Dell'Osso, River Islands' project director. "Our big complaint was that there has been no (detailed environmental) analysis."

She and other opponents of the ranch, including about 40 residents neighboring the proposed site, attended the commissioners' meeting to hear that the project has been put on hold so the county can review the letter from the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.
The district faxed the letter to the county late Thursday afternoon recommending that a "Health Risk Assessment" be completed for the proposed facility, which would house up to 1 million chickens.

River Islands' proximity to the ranch "reinforces the need to conduct an HRA to determine potential risks to future residents in the vicinity," the letter said.

But Eddie Olivera questioned the timing of the letter and maintained his project would not pose any health risks. "I'm kind of miffed," Olivera said. "As long as I've been in the poultry business, I've never heard of anybody suffering from pollution from chicken ranches."

Air district representatives couldn't immediately be reached for comment. Commissioners had been expected to allow the Olivera project to move forward on unincorporated, agriculturally zoned land.

County staffers had recommended approval based on an initial study indicating the project would have no potentially significant consequences on the area.

But residents such as Rogene Reynolds say the project would bring foul odors, noise, traffic and other problems to their community. "This is not a normal agricultural operation," Reynolds said. "It's a chicken-egg factory."

Olivera, however, says the ranch would use modem technology and other measures to address odor and other concerns.

Neighbors oppose Wal-Mart

By David Chircop
Merced Sun-Star, Friday, May 5, 2006

Big enough for 250 football fields, the size of the proposed Wal-Mart distribution center has some Southeast Merced residents ready to drop-kick the project.

But more than size, the 40 to 50 big-rig truck trips per hour it is expected to generate also has them concerned about its impact on roads.

"First and foremost it's the traffic," said Joel Knox, chairman of the Golden Valley Neighborhood Association, which recently decided to oppose the project.

Throw in concerns about air pollution and possible impacts on home values, and you have enough to foment opposition to Wal-Mart's big plan for Merced.

"It's a quality of life issue out here, too," said Knox, standing on the shoulder of Childs Avenue near an 11,000-tree almond orchard that would be bulldozed to make way for the planned 275-acre complex.

The 1.2 million-square-foot warehouse is planned on a swath of land between Childs and Gerard avenues, east of Kibby Road.

The neighborhood is already going through serious gridlock and growth pains, with 1,500 homes under construction or in the works, according to the city records.

After staying quiet for almost a year, the neighborhood association recently started to speak out against the Wal-Mart project.

Knox said the decision was made after residents were polled on their opinions at a neighborhood block party in April.

He said approximately 70 people were surveyed. All but one opposed the project, he said.

Unwanted developments are not new to the Golden Valley Neighborhood Association.

In fact, the grassroots group was formed by 13 residents in 2001 to oppose the Grove, a large publicly subsidized housing project on Parsons Avenue.

Residents in the area came together because they felt ignored by city planners, who they said were bending to the needs of an outside developer.

"This is the same type of situation as that was," said Moon Mullins, a founding member of the neighborhood group.

In 1999, it was the prospect of needed affordable housing units that attracted the city to embrace an unpopular project in Southeast Merced, he said. Now, it is the specter of needed jobs.
He said pressure placed on city officials and the developer helped force the low-income housing project to be scaled back from 400 to about 200 units. The group hopes it can also get Wal-Mart to modify its plans.

"If we didn't think we could make some changes, we wouldn't be here," said Knox.

In recent months, Merced Alliance for Responsible Growth, an umbrella organization for groups that want to change the region's growth policies, has also rallied against the Wal-Mart plan.

It has distributed numerous fliers, set up a Web site with downloadable petition letters, and it has held an anti-Wal-Mart forum. Knox sits on that organization's Wal-Mart Action Team.

Last summer, Bentonville, Ark.-based Wal-Mart announced plans to open a warehouse here by early 2008.

It would initially employ 600 people by end of the first year, and 900 by the third year, according to the company.

That alone has prompted ovations from city officials, who point out that Merced's unemployment rate is routinely more than double the state average.

Merced County's unemployment rate was 11.2 percent in March, compared with 4.8 percent statewide, according to the state Employment Development Department.

"The prospect of jobs is great," said Councilwoman Michele Gabriault-Acosta. "Any time we can bring economic benefit to the community it's something to look at."

Acosta, who lived in Porterville when Wal-Mart opened a distribution center there, said it had a positive effect on the town's economy, providing well-paying jobs for low-skilled workers.

Wal-Mart projects starting wages at a Merced warehouse would be in the $12 to $14 per hour range.

Because the project in Merced is so large, a full environmental impact report will have to be completed. The process is expected to take up to 18 months.

To connect with Highway 99, Wal-Mart's truck fleet would use the Mission Avenue Interchange, which is currently under construction.

Wal-Mart announced it would move here less than a month after the state agreed to fund that $68 million portion of the future Campus Parkway.

Knox said he is concerned that the Wal-Mart facility could open before the completion of the Mission Interchange, forcing traffic onto local streets.

Frank Quintero, Merced's development manager, said that isn't so.

If approved, the distribution center wouldn't likely open until seven months after the expected December 2007 opening of the Mission Interchange, he said.

Keith Morris, a Wal-Mart spokesman, said that might even be an ambitious opening date.

"We're committed to building the facility, but there still is a long, long process to go through," he said. "It's too early to speculate."

Wal-Mart has started aggressive expansion in the Golden State and plans to open 40 Supercenter stores here during the next several years.

That plan is being met with fierce resistance from grocer unions, who fear the Supercenters will force other groceries to slash wages.

The 200,000-square-foot Supercenter stores, staffed by nonunion workers, merge regular Wal-Mart discount stores with a grocery store.

This week a new Supercenter opened in Dinuba and more are on the way in the San Joaquin Valley.

The second Valley Wal-Mart Supercenter is scheduled to open in Hanford on May 17, and Supercenters are in the works for Selma, Tulare, Ripon and possibly other cities.

Turlock blocked the placement of a Supercenter in early 2004, and Wal-Mart is waging a legal battle to overturn that decision.

A Merced distribution center would serve between 50 and 70 Wal-Mart stores and Supercenters.

Knox, who is also the chairman for the Merced Mariposa Teachers UniServ, an educators union, said he also has a philosophical beef with Wal-Mart,which has a reputation for treating workers unfairly.

"We're the ones who are looking at the big picture," he said. "You can't tell me this is going to just serve the stores that are already here."

S.F. Chronicle commentary, May 5, 2006:

Governor got it right on global warming

By Margo Thorning

Californians have led the way in several key environmental policy areas over the years including requiring catalytic converters on cars, sulfur dioxide and nitrous oxides trading to reduce particulates in the air and clean water and land-use restrictions. Naturally, many Californians think their state should take the lead in reducing greenhouse gases, even if none of their neighbors follows suit.

Last year, when Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed the executive order establishing emission reductions for the state, Californians, who are all heart, greeted the order with enthusiasm. Thus, it came as a shock to many when Schwarzenegger recanted on mandatory targets at his climate summit on April 11. Saying he "didn't want to scare businesses out of California," the governor suggested that California try reducing carbon dioxide emissions voluntarily. Is this approach sound? Should the governor have insisted on mandatory targets?

A look at the evidence suggests that Schwarzenegger's instinct is the right one. First, mandatory emission caps are not likely to promote new energy technologies because caps will force industry to direct resources to near-term, "end-of-pipe" solutions rather than promote spending for long-term technology innovations that will enable the United States to reduce greenhouse gases and increase energy efficiency.

An emissions trading system, such as the one put in place in the European Union last year, sends the wrong signals to investors because it will create uncertainty about the return on new investment. A mandatory cap would be seen by business as just the "first step" in a likely series of increasingly stringent targets.

Investors realize that if a mandatory emissions program were established in California, they would be disadvantaged vis-a-vis other states without targets and with the European Union because EU regulations tend to be more flexible and accommodating. California businesses would certainly also be disadvantaged against competitors in India or China who have no emissions reduction targets under the Kyoto Protocol.

A large body of economic research by respected U.S. academic and energy-modeling firms show that near-term mandatory emission reduction targets increase energy prices and reduce economic growth and employment. The economic analysis provided by the California Climate Action Team is incomplete and provides a misleading picture of the likely consequences of sharp cutbacks in energy use and a requirement that 20 percent of all electricity consumed in California be from renewable sources.

Now is the time for California to provide incentives for companies to voluntarily undertake additional carbon dioxide intensity reducing investments, not promote a system that increases the risk of any investment in our economy.

Economic growth itself can be a powerful factor in reducing the amount of energy used to produce a dollar of output. For example, the United States, with its voluntarily approach to emission reduction, has cut its energy intensity by 12.2 percent over the 1997-2003 period compared to only 7.6 percent in the EU with its mandatory approach. The key factor in the this country's greater success is its rapid economic growth, which averages over 3 percent per year compared to 1 percent in the EU.

In addition, sharp increases in energy prices are already encouraging households and businesses in the United States to consume less energy. Data from the U.S. Department of Energy's Energy Information Administration showed that in 2005, energy consumption declined in the United States in spite of strong economic growth.

Global warming requires global solutions. For example, Chinese firms use four times as much energy as a U.S. firm to produce a dollar of output and seven times more than Japan. If China, India, Brazil, and other developing countries had access to even current energy and manufacturing and technologies, their emissions would be far lower.

California can do its part to promote cost-effective solutions for energy efficiency, carbon sequestration and innovative new technologies by keeping its economy strong and avoiding mandatory curbs on emissions.

Margo Thorning, who has a doctorate in economics, is senior vice president and chief economist at the American Council for Capital Formation, a Washington-based group that advocates "strong capital formation, a balanced regulatory regime and cost- effective environmental policies." Its Web site: www.accf.org.