

David Alvarez's Complicated Feelings on Walmart

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Last week, I wrote
(<http://voiceofsandiego.org/2013/09/25/how-labors-top-personality-went-from-welcoming-fletcher-to-fighting-him/>) that Councilman David Alvarez, who's running for mayor, had supported the construction of three Walmarts in his district.

That's not true. There are three Walmarts in District 8, the area of South Bay neighborhoods Alvarez represents. The company built two of them since he's been a member of the City Council. But the third has been there for some time.

I am hereby giving myself a false. The story's been corrected.



SCOTT LEWIS

ON POLITICS

(<http://voiceofsandiego.org/wp-content/uploads/4fc57e806d6b9.image.jpg>) But the fact check, like fact checks often do, has led to a complicated story. Alvarez's team wanted me to know that he does not support Walmarts. Unfortunately, it's a lot more complicated than that.

Here's the statement they gave me from Alvarez:

During my time on the City Council, I have not once voted in support of a Walmart development in District 8, let alone multiple Walmarts. In fact, in regards to the location on Imperial Ave, I requested that the City Auditor investigate whether the permits were procured inappropriately.

I asked if that meant he opposed them. I didn't get a response.

Why does it matter?

I raised the issue in the midst of my discussion with UFCW President Mickey Kasparian, who leads grocery workers at places like Vons and Ralph's. Labor leaders like him are pushing hard and spending a lot on Alvarez. Practically the only direct interest Kasparian has in city government is in the city's dealing with Walmarts, which Kasparian hates and would love to regulate.

As he told me, it's not jobs he thinks San Diego needs. It's good jobs.

As former Mayor Bob Filner's term in office exploded in controversy, he gave the final OK to that Walmart Neighborhood Market (<http://sandiego.walmartcommunity.com/neighborhood-market/>) on Imperial Avenue that Alvarez mentioned above. Some had thought Filner might try to hold it up, as he did with a Jack in the Box (<http://www.10news.com/news/filner->

issues-stop-use-order-preventing-jack-in-the-box-remodel-in-north-park-083013) in North Park.

If Alvarez supported Walmarts, that would make Kasparian's support of his mayoral bid more interesting than it already was.

Alvarez has not been clear on Walmarts in his district. He has certainly not been clearly against them.

Let's start with the one that was recently built at 575 Saturn Blvd.

In 2012, city leaders gathered at its groundbreaking. Alvarez was not there but he issued a statement

(<http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2012/Feb/09/walmart-announcing-plans-open-store-south-san-dieg/>):

"I am pleased to see an anchor tenant move into this building that has been vacant for several years. I believe having a successful business here will assist in the economic rejuvenation of the community and will help serve the residents retail needs," he wrote.

Walmart highlighted multiple articles that include Alvarez's statement on its site (<http://sandiego.walmartcommunity.com/?s=%22david+alvarez%22>).

Then there's the controversial Sherman Heights Walmart that went up at Imperial Avenue. You might remember this row (<http://voiceofsandiego.org/2012/04/23/the-big-issues-in-walmarts-construction->

controversy/). Neighbors got upset when they saw walls come down at the historic farmer's market building. Some tried to stop it.

Ultimately, a judge ruled

(<http://voiceofsandiego.org/2012/04/23/walmart-wins-in-sherman-heights/>) that all was in order and construction resumed.

It just opened.

So where was Alvarez on it? As his statement said, he requested an audit. But did he outright oppose it? Or did he support it?

I couldn't find any evidence that he had opposed it. Though Georgette Gomez, a community activist in the area, tweeted that Alvarez "fought to hold Walmart accountable (<https://twitter.com/Georgette75/status/383474542330408960>)."

In this April 2012 interview on KPBS (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1ouzpaCfiI>), Alvarez says clearly that there's a desire for something like Walmart in the neighborhood.

"Absolutely, the community is, overwhelmingly, in support of a grocery store coming in to the community," he said.

He said his concern was that he and others had just learned of the plans to build there and Walmart was not being open about what the building would look like.

"They were moving on a path without trying to engage the community," he said.

Then the host asked whether it was too late for Walmart to win the community over.

“Absolutely not too late. Let’s get down to business. Let’s all stand together when you announce the store is opening,” he said.

Walmart has been pleased with Alvarez. Here’s a statement the company sent me:

Walmart values the opportunity we have had to work with Councilmember David Alvarez on the South San Diego and Neighborhood Market stores in his district and appreciates the help he has given us in working with the community to create jobs and increase access to fresh, affordable food. We have received positive feedback from the community on both stores and look forward to continuing to serve the residents of District 8.

There’s one other big Walmart issue with which Alvarez has dealt: the city’s big-box ordinance. In late 2010, the city passed an ordinance

(<http://voiceofsandiego.org/2010/12/02/big-boxes-get-the-big-boot/>) requiring a special conditional-use permit for large so-called Walmart Supercenters. The City Council would have gotten the power to kill such stores if economic studies determined they would have adverse impacts on other businesses.

It was a major decision and Walmart leaders were furious. They immediately gathered signatures to force a referendum. They succeeded.

Alvarez was not in office when the City Council passed the ordinance. But he was when Walmart threw it back to Council demanding it go to the ballot. The Council decided not to let that happen, saving the roughly \$3 million the special election would cost. The Council repealed the ordinance itself.

Ben Hueso, Alvarez's predecessor and the president of the City Council when he was there, had been the law's champion and pushed it through before he left.

But when it came back, Alvarez helped kill it. He said the city could not afford the election.

Here's how he put it:

In the end, I think this ordinance has become a test of strength between two sets of special interests, and serving special interests and high-paid lobbyists is not my priority. My priority is in solving our city's structural budget deficit. My priority is in serving our constituents through the city services we provide, good efficient quality city services.

One of those "special interests" Alvarez was talking about, of course, was Kasparian's union, UFCW.

After the law's collapse, Kasparian and allies got then-state Sen. Juan Vargas to push a law in Sacramento that would have required these large Walmart Supercenters to do those special

economic impact studies. But that's it. Unlike the San Diego law, it would have no teeth after that.

Gov. Jerry Brown vetoed it. One of the votes against it in the Legislature came from Assemblyman Nathan Fletcher.

And that was one of the votes Kasparian told me he's having trouble forgiving Fletcher for.

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