

Walmart invests in Oildale

By John Cox

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An often-overlooked stretch of North Chester Avenue stole the spotlight Wednesday as Oildale celebrated the opening of a neighborhood grocery store some hope will spark additional investment nearby.

Hundreds of area residents and other spectators gathered to watch North High School's marching band play and its cheerleaders cheer before checking out the store's fresh foods, pharmacy and general merchandise.

In addition to its new Walmart Neighborhood Market in Oildale, the Arkansas-based retail giant unveiled an expansion Wednesday that turned its store at 8400 Rosedale Highway into a Supercenter.

The expansion project on Rosedale created 80 new jobs and increased the store's size by 28 percent to 161,000 square feet, the company said. It also broadens its assortment of goods to include groceries, including meat and bakery.

There was also an announcement that a Walmart store will be the anchor tenant of a new shopping center coming in 2015 to the southwest corner of Calloway and Olive drives.

The 157,000-square-foot store planned for Calloway and Olive is expected to open in July 2015, according to Steve Adams, senior vice president of Newmark Grubb ASU & Associates.

In the planning stages for 10 years, the shopping center will include a major fitness center measuring 25,000 square feet, an 11,000-square-foot gasoline and convenience store, two chain restaurants, a local optometrist and a locally owned sandwich shop, Adams said.

At 41,000 square feet and 96 employees, the 24-hour store at 3111 North Chester represents significant new development in an area that tends to draw less interest from national retailers than parts of Bakersfield with stronger demographics and more new home construction.

Walmart said its goal in entering the Oildale market was to meet customer demand for affordably priced fresh food located conveniently close to home.

From the company's perspective, if the store attracts other businesses, aside from the Jack in the Box opening across the parking lot, so much the better.

"Other businesses see the benefit of being located near a Walmart," company spokeswoman Delia Garcia said.

There's certainly room for it, said Walmart's pharmacy area manager, Tony Paton. He noted two vacant lots nearby, including a large one opposite Chester from the new store. He said the company's selection of a site next to available land was no coincidence.

"We want to make some space available for other businesses to join us," he said.

Customers filling their shopping carts Wednesday were hopeful of such development but focused more on the store itself.

"I think it's great," said Oildale resident Barbara Tate, 77. "We have to go all the way to Rosedale, east Bakersfield and the southwest" to shop for everyday goods, she said.

Another neighbor, Josie Poush, a mother of four, agreed the new store was convenient and would save her "lots of gas." She also expects it will freshen the area's reputation and give people "a brand new, fresh impression" of Oildale.

That's already partly true in the case of Lena Ramirez, also a mother of four living in Oildale. She and her husband have been considering a move out of the area but now are re-evaluating.

"It's kind of making us want to stay in Oildale," she said. "Little things like this, I think -- it's going to bring Oildale up."

But is Wednesday's grand opening the start of an Oildale economic boom? Commercial real estate broker Scott Underhill doesn't think so.

"I wouldn't see any kind of paradigm shift, because the demographics just aren't there" to support substantial new development, he said. While Walmart uses a sophisticated computer model to identify areas for new construction, other retailers tend to look for recent homebuilding, which the nearby area of Oildale generally lacks.

There have been other investments, however.

Dollar General built a small grocery store two years ago by North Chester on Roberts Lane. Also, Omni Family Health is building a \$4.65 million, 15,600-square-foot health center at 210 North Chester that will provide family medical care.

"I think that there is development going on in the Oildale area. I also feel that that community is in need of assistance provided by everyone," Omni Chief Operations Officer Diego Martinez said. "Anything that is done to help the community is a ... win-win."

Mike Maggard, the Kern County supervisor representing the area, said the new Walmart does two things: It brings a new energy and standard of operation, and it injects capital to an area in need of it.

"You've got to give props to Walmart for being willing to invest," he said. "They see economic potential in the same neighborhood in which I, too, am trying to create economic development."





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