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Overflow crowd jams Wal-Mart hearing

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VANCOUVER - The vast majority of the 70 speakers signed up for Monday night's public hearing on the proposed Wal-Mart development in south Vancouver will have to wait until tonight or the wee hours of Wednesday morning to express their opinions on the project.

Monday's public hearing, which began at 7:30 p.m., recessed at 10:30 p.m. with only a handful of speakers able to address council.

The first part of the meeting consisted of presentations by city staff and the architect and traffic consultant working on the Wal-Mart proposal, followed by questions from council members, who focused on the environmental and traffic impacts of the project proposed for the south side of Southeast Marine Drive between Ontario and Main streets.

The first speaker from the public wasn't heard until 8:42 p.m. Deming Smith expressed concerns about the impact of a new Wal-Mart on other local businesses, as well as about increased pollution from more traffic and its impact on families and children in the area.

He was part of a crowd of about 120 people who jammed the council chambers and filled the extra chairs set up outside for the overflow. Some people held "No Wal-Mart Gridlock" signs while others had bright green "We want Wal-Mart" stickers on their shirts.

Coun. Anne Roberts expressed concern about the increase in greenhouse gas emissions the traffic to Wal-Mart would produce, saying it would hinder the city's goal of reducing greenhouse gases.

Coun. David Cadman questioned the validity of a traffic study for the proposal, saying it minimized the number of new trips the store would generate.

And councillors and speakers questioned the statement by city staff that the impact of the store on local businesses and the surrounding neighbourhood would be minimal.

The hearing will reconvene at 7:30 p.m. tonight. "We will be here until 8 a.m. [on Wednesday] if necessary," said Vancouver Mayor Larry Campbell. "Bring your jammies."

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