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Poway's good neighbor wants to do more

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Art Gladue knows something about family life and the kids outgrowing clothes and shoes all at the same time – he should, he has four children.

Art Gladue knows something about running his store, where he greets each of the 350 employees by name. He should, he has been in store management for 14 years. In all that time, the week that sticks in Art's memory was in October 2007. Poway was under assault by walls of flames, although Art's store was not in harm's way.

People starting showing up with RVs and horse trailers. Could they camp in the parking lot? "Sure," was Art's answer.

As flames leapfrogged highways and made evacuations exceedingly difficult, Art's store was the closest supply point for the bandages, water, towels, eye drops, face masks and sundries that firefighters and sheriff's deputies needed, or the toilet paper, water, stuffed animals and kids' coloring books that parking lot evacuees coveted. Horse owners were desperate for water buckets, batteries and even paint. Art Gladue didn't have to call some far-off corporate headquarters or think twice. "It's yours," was his answer.

The store needed to stay open to serve the public. Employees, however, needed to go home to look after the family or to help the neighbors. "Just go. We'll see you when it's over," was Art's answer.

In those smoke-filled days, the tile floor of Art's massive store was anything but its normal sparkling white. The staff was down to Art, a few managers and three cashiers. A handful of people, exhausted from trying to do the work of 350, finally had to close the doors for 10 hours.

Art's store, if you haven't guessed by now, is the Wal-Mart on Community Road in Poway. The retailer wants to expand it 45 percent to 198,000 square feet to give it supercenter features. Wal-Mart has acquired 1.5 acres on one corner of the shopping center, including a nearby building, to do so.

Store completion, if approved, probably won't be until 2010. By then, either Oceanside, Vista or Lakeside will be the first supercenter in San Diego County.

Poway residents would have the choice of a new, full-sized grocery, a much larger garden center and a sit-down deli. The existing building would receive a complete makeover with double-width aisles, new signage and appurtenances inside. New architectural touches would

break up the scale of the building's facade and water-thrifty plants would be mainstays of the new landscaping.

As Wal-Mart embarks on gaining regulatory approvals, some may seize the moment as an opportunity to present ideological arguments about Wal-Mart being non-union, its wages (\$11.12 an hour on average in California), or partial health benefits. They probably will leave it to others to counter that Wal-Mart has saved Americans \$1 billion on generic drugs in just two years, is an industry leader in the recycling of packaging materials and in energy efficiency, or that it picks up all the costs for employees obtaining a GED.

Surely, Wal-Mart critics will neglect to mention that the expansion would create 150 new jobs in Poway. That's no big deal – except to the thousands who may apply.

We'll leave the ideological harangues to others. When all is said and done, this shopping center, home to Wal-Mart for the past 15 years, would have the exact same amount of parking lot and building footprints it has now, only in a different configuration.

Poway area consumers would have those new choices. (By the way, of the 3,500 Wal-Marts in the nation, Art's store year in and year out already ranks in the top five in plant sales.) Consumers would have a chance to see their dollars go further.

And 150 new employees would be on a first-name basis with Art Gladue.