

Craig Scharton: Cars will revive Fulton Mall

Fresno

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The Fresno City Council will soon decide whether to restore traffic to Fulton Street.

This is a decision that should be based on fact and not on opinion. If the council's decision is based on information gathered from the experience of other cities, it will be simple. Here are the facts:

89% of the pedestrian malls in the U.S. failed. Fresno was the second city to install a pedestrian mall. Kalamazoo, Mich., was the first. Kalamazoo added traffic back to Burdick Street in 1998. Burdick Street now has 100% occupancy for ground floor, retail storefronts.

11% of pedestrian malls are successful. They have one or more of the following five components: They are one-block long; they are in a high tourist destination (Las Vegas, New Orleans); they have an adjoining university (Boulder, Colo., and Madison, Wisc.); they are near a beach (Santa Monica, Miami Beach); they are in a small city with less than 100,000. Fresno does not have any of these components.

90% of cities that have restored traffic to their pedestrian malls saw revitalization within the first four years. The mall in Louisville, Ky., reopened and vacancy rates decreased from 80% to 50% and property values increased within one year of reopening. The City Center Mall's vacancy rate in Eugene, Ore., went from 25% to 6% in four years. In Burlington, Iowa, Jefferson Street's ground-floor vacancies dropped from 80% to 20% once the two blocks were reopened to cars in 1990 and continued to drop to 0% within two years of opening.

There is only one successful historically-restored pedestrian mall in this country: Charlottesville, Va. This city has a resident population of 44,000 with an additional 20,000 University of Virginia students adjacent to its mall.

So, for the people who want to restore the historic character of the Fulton Mall, you have no good examples of how this could work in Fresno.

We know that most pedestrian malls failed in the United States. We know that Fresno doesn't possess any of the characteristics of the few pedestrian malls that have succeeded.

If the Fresno City Council selects option one, all of the sculptures will be preserved, we will end up with more trees than we have currently, we will have extremely wide sidewalks for pedestrians and outdoor dining, and downtown customers will have 190 new on-street parking spaces.

High turnover, on-street parking is the most critical for healthy retail districts and can contribute \$10,000 in commerce per day.

We must elevate the debate about the future of our downtown beyond opinion and nostalgia.

The facts are crystal clear. We were the second city to have a pedestrian mall. We will be the 171st to restore traffic to our downtown retail street.

We were a leader once, but now we can use readily available information from other cities to make an intelligent, factual decision to put the Valley's most prominent downtown back on track.

We have the money (the \$16 million federal TIGER Grant), now we need a logical, rational decision from our City Council.

Save our downtown and its historic buildings, not the out-dated concrete that blocks commerce, circulation and visibility.

Craig Scharton owns Peeve's Public House & Local Market on the Fulton Mall. He has been a Fulton Mall property owner and manager, a Fulton Mall resident, director of Downtown and Community Revitalization and was the first president of the California Main Street Alliance.

Read more here: <http://www.fresnobee.com/2014/02/10/3761887/craig-scharton-cars-will-revive.html#storylink=cpy>