

# Swearingin: Downtown Fresno's future faces key vote in two weeks

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Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin in her annual State of Downtown speech finally promised some action in a time frame other than years.

Come to the City Council meeting on Feb. 27, Swearingin told an estimated 400 people Tuesday evening, for the brawl of your life.

That's when City Hall is to decide Fulton Mall's fate.

Swearingin has long pitched a return of cars to the six-block Fulton Corridor between Tuolumne and Inyo streets. She says traffic on what was once Fresno's main street is a key step toward inner-city revitalization.

It won't be easy, she said. Critics will pummel those who support her, she said.

But, Swearingin added, "We will break through (to success) because we want this so bad."

This was Swearingin's fifth State of Downtown event and the first that didn't start shortly after sunrise. Sponsored by Downtown Fresno Partnership, it was held at The Grand 1401 near the mall's north end.

Her first four reviews were filled with hope.

Swearingin in 2010 touted the creation of the Downtown and Community Revitalization Department. It later disappeared into the planning department as a money-saving move.

The mayor in 2011 introduced the new property-based improvement district that would be called Downtown Fresno Partnership. The group markets downtown.

The 2012 speech focused on a downtown neighborhoods blueprint and a Fulton Corridor plan. Both plans at the time were still simmering behind closed doors.

Swearingin last year kept her remarks brief, giving the spotlight to urban-development expert Henry Beer. Shoppers like their cars, he said, lending outside support for the mayor's Fulton Corridor plan.

The mayor and Downtown Fresno Partnership Chief Executive Kate Borders apparently sensed that agendas full of promises were wearing thin. They delivered on Tuesday a one-two message aimed in part at the City Council.

First, Borders and downtown stakeholders gave testimonials about the great things to be found in Fresno's heart. The art scene is exploding. New housing is replacing empty buildings. Restaurants are opening and businesses are expanding.

But if excellence has become downtown's norm, then why would the City Council endure a political firestorm in two weeks by voting to rip up the nearly 50-year-old Fulton Mall?

Swearingin had the answer.

Despite the progress, Swearingin said, "it's going to be almost impossible to revitalize our downtown."

She listed the reasons, all familiar to veterans of previous State of Downtown speeches.

Downtown must fight 65 years of suburban growth, she said. Fresno has a chronically weak economy. Downtown infrastructure -- think century old water pipes -- stinks. The Redevelopment Agency is dead. Clovis is always a tempting alternative. The Great Recession still hurts.

And perhaps most damning of all, Swearingin said, people after all these decades of hype think downtown is unfixable.

"I want us to come to grips with just how difficult this will be," she said.

Swearingin then pivoted to her main point.

The Feb. 27 council agenda has yet to be drafted. But everyone at Tuesday's event received a flier headlined: "This is the moment we've been waiting for -- making Fulton Street a reality."

The flier encouraged everyone to attend the Feb. 27 council hearing on whether to proceed with what's being called the Fulton Project. This is Swearingin's vision for cars and a refurbished Fulton Corridor.

Swearingin told the audience how she and her staff persevered to get a nearly \$16 million federal grant to fix the corridor. Her message: Yes, downtown revitalization is a tall order. But money -- always the hang-up -- is in place. If downtown's emerging promise is not to die, then the political hurdle must be cleared.

The mayor has good reason to be concerned. Some council members think she worries too much about downtown, to the detriment of other districts. Many Fresnoans think the mall just needs a bit of freshening.

Swearingin wants lots of loyal troops on her side when it's decision time.

"We choose to move forward," Swearingin said in conclusion. "See you on Feb. 27."

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