

# Is It Terrible, Or A Treasure? Fresno's Fulton Mall Debate Heats Up

By [JOE MOORE](#)

Is Fresno's Fulton Mall a priceless piece of art, or an impediment to revitalization of the city's historic core? That's the issue facing the Fresno City Council later this month, as the debate to re-open the pedestrian mall to vehicle traffic heats up, thanks to a \$16 million federal grant.

On Valley Public Radio's Valley Edition, we invited guests with two different perspectives to join us and talk about their competing visions for the future of this historic part of the city. They were:

Kate Borders, the President and CEO of the [Downtown Fresno Partnership](#)

Doug Richert, the Co-Chair of the [Downtown Fresno Coalition](#)

Background:

Fresno's Fulton Mall was the talk of the nation when it opened in 1964. The city took six blocks of Fresno's main downtown commercial street and converted it into a pedestrian only space, filled with hundreds of trees, dozens of fountains and what today is considered a by many a priceless collection of public art, including works by Renoir, Fresno's own Stan Bitters and Clement Renzi.

At the time, the mall was considered a bold step in remaking the traditional American downtown into a more pleasant atmosphere for family shopping, to better compete with suburban shopping malls. It was also a part of the nation's post-war urban renewal craze, which sought to rebuild American cities with the bold ideas for the future.

For the first few years after it opened, the mall was a success. But by 1970, things were headed downhill, as Fresno's northward expansion hit into overdrive and new shopping destinations, like Fresno's Fashion Fair drew traditional shoppers away from downtown. In the 1980's the Fulton Mall's department stores closed, followed by many other longtime businesses.

Today, many of the mall's biggest historic buildings sit empty, and shuttered storefronts are as common as those filled by businesses. The area serves a mix of government workers and diverse shoppers, who represent the valley's immigrant communities.

Now, the City of Fresno plans to revitalize the area by tearing out the 50-year old pedestrian mall and turning back the clock to the days when cars drove Fulton Street. Mayor Ashley Swearingin says that the lack of vehicle traffic is holding the area back, and discourages private investment. Area property owners, including the business group the Downtown Fresno Partnership generally support the plan and want to see the mall removed.

But not everyone agrees. Opponents, including the citizen's group the Downtown Fresno Coalition, blame the long decline of downtown not on the mall, but on Fresno's unchecked northward sprawl. They say the mall is a civic and historic treasure, and the work of the prominent landscape architect Garrett Eckbo. They also raise concerns about gentrification, the loss of hundreds of mature trees, and space dedicated to pedestrians. They want to see the mall's infrastructure restored, and say the mall itself should be a draw for both shoppers and tourists.

What do you think should happen to the Fulton Mall? Should it be torn out? Preserved? Modified? Or is downtown Fresno a lost cause entirely? Share your thoughts in the comments below.