

Fresno City Council to make big Fulton Mall decision

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By George Hostetter

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The Fresno City Council is facing a historic decision on the Fulton Mall — rip it up, spruce it up or let it stew some more.

The council on Thursday will tackle a long list of mall-related issues, all of them connected to the automobile.

Almost since taking office five years ago, Mayor Ashley Swearengin has insisted that cars must return to the struggling six-block Fulton Corridor if downtown revitalization is to succeed. The key pieces of her plan are falling into place, Swearengin says. She needs the council's green light to proceed.

"We know that revitalizing our city center and our overall city takes a lot of steps," Swearengin says. "Most of those steps are small. This is a big step."

It would be the next-to-last step. The last one would be finishing the design work, putting the project out to bid and construction. It all could be done by early 2015.

The mayor has support. The recent State of Downtown meeting of community and business leaders was a two-hour shindig on the virtues of vehicular traffic once again making its way along Fulton Street between Tuolumne and Inyo streets.

But the opposition is fierce. Nowhere was this more evident than at the Feb. 5 Planning Commission meeting. The commissioners unanimously endorsed the return of cars, but not before security was called in and a mall supporter was booted from the council chamber for raising such a ruckus of protest.

Those opposing a return of traffic make a case as simple as Swearengin's. The mall is a national treasure, they say. Its plight is the fault not of design but of commitment, they say. Fix Fulton Mall, they say.

And Swearengin's level of council support is far from clear. The council about four years ago agreed to spend a couple of million dollars on mall design options. The council periodically approves mall-related contracts. But talk from the dais is increasingly ominous.

Council members ask: Is Swearingin obsessed with downtown? Are other neighborhoods being ignored? Is the Fulton project another money pit?

"I don't buy it," Council Member Sal Quintero says of Swearingin's logic for removing the mall.

Quintero says he'll offer several new ideas on Thursday. The biggest would retain the mall's middle third as a pedestrian walkway while opening the rest of the corridor to cars.

"I wouldn't be surprised if they pulled it (from the agenda) if they don't think they have the votes," Quintero says.

Swearingin says she thinks she has the votes. She says no general fund money is being used and current city services won't be compromised.

Such friction is nothing new. It's been civil war over Fulton Corridor and downtown ever since architect Victor Gruen came here in the late 1950s to pitch an experimental way of reordering Fresno's core. City leaders bought it. Fulton Mall is the most lasting proof of their boldness.

But Swearingin has had her fill of mall idealism. She plans to tell the council on Thursday what she's been telling her constituents for years.

"We tried. It didn't work."

A long, winding trail

City leaders from the beginning wanted two things from the mall: regional dominance and national prominence.

World War II was 10 years in the past and suburbia was on the horizon when city leaders began searching for ways to re-energize the downtown business district.

Gruen, father of the indoor shopping mall but an unrelenting critic of America's car-crazed culture, was hired to fix things.

Much was done. Broadway to the west of Fulton Street in the post-war years was viewed by some as urban blight. Housing stock in many neighborhoods was abysmal. Gruen's plan and City Hall's resolve remade much of the city's heart.

But this was urban renewal of a kind found in any American city of the era. Gruen's firm teamed with landscape architect Garrett Eckbo to offer something to set Fresno apart. Turn the six blocks of Fulton Street, Fresno's retail center since the 19th century, into a pedestrian mall, they said. Add public art, build eye-catching fountains, plant lots of trees and consign cars to parking garages. The unchallenged rule of pedestrians, they said, would attract shoppers from throughout the Valley and praise from tastemakers throughout the world.

"As the first step in the Fresno Plan, this mall represents an all-out effort to preserve the economic and social vitality of this city," then-Gov. Edmund G. Brown said at the mall's opening on Sept. 1, 1964. "Above and beyond what this pioneering effort means to Fresno, it stands as evidence to the entire nation that one of our greatest problems can be successfully met and solved. I refer to the problem of our cities."

Brown spoke to an audience of about 25,000, said to be the largest to gather downtown in city history. The mall today is but a shadow of what it was 50 years ago. The reasons defy consensus or easy cataloguing.

Swearengin took office in 2009 and moved swiftly if not always easily to lay the foundation for a new Fulton Corridor. She doesn't attribute miraculous powers to the arrival of cars. She says the Gruen-Eckbo experience should put an end to miracle promises. She says simply that the corridor is woefully under-used and Americans, for good or ill, are wedded to their cars. Accept this and see what time and entrepreneurial spirit bring, she says.

Swearengin in September separated herself from two generations of empty-pocket mall-fixers when the federal government, a vital partner in the mall's creation, gave her a nearly \$16 million grant to pay for ripping up the mall.

The council will be given only two options on Thursday. Both feature two-way traffic on Fulton. Both feature public art, trees and parking. Option 1 (Swearengin's preference) has a straight street slightly off center to permit a wide promenade on the east side. Option 2 has a curving street down the middle.

A third option long on the table was retaining the mall but giving it a thorough makeover. This option has disappeared.

The reason is money. Getting cars back to the corridor will cost about \$20 million, city officials say. Most will come from the federal grant, written in a way that prohibits its use for anything other than the first two options.

Quintero says council members don't like limits.

"I'd like to see if we could get the feds to change the way the grant is worded," he says.

Debate changed by events

If the past is any hint, Thursday's arguments will follow certain paths.

Swearengin and staff will talk of Fulton Corridor's importance to the 2035 general plan update. They will tout the big-picture environmental benefits of vehicular traffic along the six blocks.

Opponents will trumpet the mall's value to the poor, the old and the disabled. They will not be shy about threatening legal action.

But hanging over everything will be the evolution of downtown itself. Both sides will have to explain Uptown.

Uptown — the Cultural Arts District to some, the Mural District to others — is the triangle-shaped area that touches the mall's north end. It's bounded by Tuolumne, H and Divisadero streets.

Uptown in the 1950s also had challenges. But it never lost its cars.

Uptown began changing about 15 years ago. The reasons are many. Redevelopment Agency money is not the least of them.

Uptown vs. Fulton Mall in 2014 is a study in contrasts. For instance, take the 90 minutes between 5:30 p.m. and 7 p.m. of last Thursday.

A walk along the mall beginning at Inyo was like a walk through a concrete desert. Empty or darkened storefronts were common. Several small clothing stores were open, but customers were missing.

Peeve's Public House, the new mall restaurant opened by former downtown revitalization czar Craig Scharton, had about a dozen patrons.

A young man walked by the restaurant's front window. When the man reached the Fresno County health building next door, he began screaming, for no apparent reason.

Crossing Tuolumne to Uptown was like going to a different world.

Warnors theater on Fulton was showing the 1920 silent film "Polyanna."

About 100 people were eating dinner in the Cornerstone Church's conference center on Fulton. They were one of the church's many ministries.

Euphoria Hair-Nails at the mixed-use Assemi-family project called 1612 Fulton had three customers.

Curbside parking in front of Tokyo Garden on Fulton was in short supply.

Two blocks away at San Joaquin and M streets, more than a dozen young computer experts in the front room of Bitwise Industries were preparing for their weekly two-hour conference on programming.

Crichton Place, the Assemis' latest Uptown apartment complex at San Joaquin and L Street, is nearly built.

A little to the west on San Joaquin, two young women in workout gear were jogging up and down the sidewalk. A small building nearby had been turned into a fitness center. Ally Varela,

one of the women, said she could find a gym near her northwest Fresno home. "But I like it here," she said. "It's peaceful."

Fulton Cycle Works in Iron Bird Lofts at Fulton and Divisadero was open. One customer left. A minute later, another walked in.

Back at Warnors, R.J. Fruehe was keeping an eye on his restored 1913 Ford Model T touring car sitting in front of the theater entrance. The car attracted a crowd. When the night's over, Fruehe said, he would drive the Model T eight miles to his home.

The council and Fresno on Thursday must decide how to bring Uptown's emerging vigor to Fulton Corridor. Bring back cars? Refreshen the mall? Do nothing and hope?

Downtown Fresno Partnership Chief Executive Kate Borders favors cars. She sums up the basic issue for downtown.

"Wallets. Pocketbooks. We want them."

The reporter can be reached at (559) 441-6272 or ghostetter@fresnobee.com. Read his City Beat blog at fresnobee.com/city-beat.

If you go

What: Fresno City Council hearing on Fulton Mall project

Where: City Hall council chamber, 2600 Fresno St.

When: 5 p.m. Thursday