

EDITORIAL: City Council must approve Swearengin's plan for Fulton

Returning traffic is essential step to revitalizing downtown Fresno.

<http://www.fresnobee.com/2014/02/26/3792844/city-council-must-approve-swearengins.html>

By The Fresno Bee Editorial Board

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Nearly 50 years ago, then-Gov. Edmund G. "Pat" Brown lit the clock tower and the revolutionary Fulton Mall opened in front of 25,000 people in downtown Fresno.

Cities across the country sent delegations to see what famous urban architect Victor Gruen had designed in a 16-square-block area of the self-proclaimed "Best Little City in the U.S.A."

For a spell, the plan worked. The mall was packed, and commerce thrived. Some businesses bragged that sales had risen by 40%. But by the end of the 1980s, all the major retailers were gone, their spaces filled by discount stores — or nothing at all.

It's time now for the Fresno City Council to end this noble but unsuccessful venture and approve Mayor Ashley Swearengin's plan to return vehicle traffic to Fulton.

The mayor has secured \$16 million in federal grants to turn the six-block pedestrian mall into a two-way street — one with beautiful landscaping and sidewalks wide enough to accommodate the people who work and shop there now.

Swearengin, the property owners and the businesses on the mall believe that returning traffic is a key step toward inner-city revitalization. Studies of other cities that have ripped out pedestrian malls show a significant increase in sales tax revenues and property values.

Large numbers of Fresnans and residents of nearby cities oppose Swearengin's plan. They typically describe the mall as "unique" — which it is — and advocate that the mall be restored.

But the fact is, the mall is a failure and a greatly depreciated asset. Moreover, the city can't afford to restore the mall. Nor can it afford to properly maintain the mall. Even if it could do both, it's doubtful that people would flock there.

Back in 1964, blocking off a large part of downtown appeared to be the perfect solution to curb the flight of people and businesses to Fresno's northern edges. But, in retrospect, the mall raised significant barriers to easily navigating downtown and provided people with a significant reason to shop closer to their homes.

There are people who say the mall should be preserved because it's a prime example of mid-20th century architecture and planning. We disagree. Successful cities evolve and adapt to best fit the needs of citizens.

Council members can move Fresno forward tonight by voting to dismantle the Fulton Mall. Returning traffic there won't be a magic bullet. We learned long ago that there are no quick fixes for downtown. But opening the city's historic main street to traffic will make it easier for people to shop and get where they want to go downtown.

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