

# Reopen Fresno's Fulton Mall to traffic, City Council says in historic vote

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Chuck Leonard, center, pumps his fist as he marches with supporters for Option 1 of Fulton Mall development up the front steps of Fresno City Hall after marching from Peeve's Public House Thursday afternoon, February 27, 2014 in downtown Fresno, Calif. ERIC PAUL ZAMORA — THE FRESNO BEE | [Buy Photo](#)

The Fresno City Council decided the fate of Fulton Mall with a 5-2 vote late Thursday in favor of putting traffic back on the street, handing a victory to Mayor Ashley Swearingin and almost certainly ending the 50-year urban experiment.

The lengthy debate ended with a vote at 11 p.m. and followed afternoon votes by the council on lesser funding requests, some of which will cover the costs of other downtown revitalization efforts.

But the main event began at 5 p.m. with the Fulton Mall hearing. Mall supporters and opponents, wearing brightly colored T-shirts to signify which side they favored, packed the council chamber and waited hours to give their opinions. Some said restore the decaying pedestrian walkway. Others said Swarengin is right to try to open the six-block corridor to cars.

Council members Paul Caprioglio and Sal Quintero voted against the measure. Caprioglio was concerned about possible cost overruns. Quintero preferred to maintain the middle two blocks as a mall while opening both ends to cars.

Council Member Lee Brand included in his motion several planning safeguards against cost overruns. The \$20 million project uses no money from the general fund.

Council President Steve Brandau said the mall isn't working economically as a pedestrian walkway.

"It's like an economic Berlin Wall -- the economy stops there," Brandau said.

Swarengin was surrounded by well-wishers after the vote. She said the council decision is a big step in the right direction for the city. She has been working since she took office in January 2009 to spur downtown's rebirth.

It's not the last decision on the mall. The council is expected in January 2015 to vote on awarding a contract for the project's construction. But Thursday's vote after a six-hour hearing clearly shows that City Hall to a large degree is united on what to do with the Fulton Corridor.

The council was asked to take a handful of actions. They included:

- Adopt an environmental impact report.
- Designate portions of Fulton, Kern, Mariposa and Merced as streets and remove the current designation of pedestrian mall/open space.
- Apply for \$1.8 million in Fresno County Measure C Transit-Oriented Development funds.
- Complete the agreement with the federal government for a \$15.9 million construction grant.
- Approve Option 1 and the city's preferred future for the Fulton Corridor.

The council considered two options. Both have many similarities.

Two-way vehicular traffic would return to what are now Fulton, Merced, Mariposa and Kern malls. Up to 190 on-street parking spaces would be created. Nearly three-quarters of the mall

system's features -- sculptures, benches, fountains -- would be retained in the area. The corridor would have more trees than today. More than half of the right-of-way would be reserved for pedestrians.

Option 2 would take distinctive elements of Fulton Mall and rebuild them in five or six "vignettes" along the corridor. Option 1 doesn't have vignettes.

The staff report and supporting documents runs more than 1,100 pages. The report, written by Downtown Revitalization manager Elliott Balch, uses words and photos to present a pro-car case four years in the making.

The mall, Balch wrote, is a beehive of activity during special events such as the annual Christmas Parade. On most other days, it's lightly used at best.

The place is deserted at dark even when the sun sets in the early evening, Balch wrote.

Fulton Street between Inyo and Tuolumne for more than eight decades was Fresno's business center, its unofficial "main street," he wrote. Things have changed in the half-century since the mall was created.

The reasons are many, Balch wrote, but office occupancy and lease rates show that "Fulton Mall is experiencing challenges at a level wholly beyond those seen elsewhere in downtown, as well as the rest of the city."

About 200 pedestrian malls were built in the U.S. from the late 1950s through the 1980s. Most, Balch wrote, suffered woes similar to Fulton Mall's.

"No city that has reopened its pedestrian mall is known to be considering closing it permanently again," Balch wrote, citing research done by officials from the federal Strong Cities, Strong Communities program and the Downtown Fresno Partnership.

Finally, Balch wrote, the few successful pedestrian malls are found near universities, with their influential youth culture, or popular tourist magnets such as a beach.

The return of cars to Fulton Corridor will "create a vibrant and sustainable hub for activity in downtown Fresno and the Fresno region," Balch wrote.

Balch's report helped set the stage for the public debate -- and many wanted to participate. Every seat on the ground floor of the council chambers and in the balcony was taken. People were leaning over the balcony rail and standing in part of the ground floor's center aisle. An overflow crowd gathered in the foyer.

Many of those in favor of cars on the corridor wore orange T-shirts that said "Open for Business, Fulton Street." Many who want to keep the mall wore green T-shirts that said "Save the Fulton Mall."

Brandau said at the hearing's start that each audience speaker would get two minutes at the microphone instead of the usual three. He said he didn't want a repeat of the recent Bus Rapid Transit hearing, which went more than seven hours and ended after midnight. Brandau cut off public comment after about two hours, concluding at 9:30 p.m. after letting five speakers from each side of the debate (picked at random) each have their two minutes at the microphone.

Earlier, Swearingin opened the hearing with brief remarks. "This is probably a historic crowd -- and with good reason," she said. "This is a historic evening."

She said the Fulton Corridor between Tuolumne and Inyo streets is "the birthplace of our city." The six blocks on Fulton had long been Fresno's "main street," the center of the city's commerce and cultural life. "Today it's a place of great distress and great deterioration," she said.

The return of cars to the corridor is a key step to downtown revitalization but "it's not the only step," Swearingin said. She said other steps include reformed development codes and developer incentives.

After Swearingin spoke, City Hall staff and city-hired consultants gave reports. A key point in the presentation: Parts of the mall aren't compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The act didn't exist in 1964 when the mall was built.

The mayor's preferred option -- two-way traffic with the street slightly off-center -- would cost slightly less than \$20 million. Staff said the city has guaranteed funding of nearly \$21 million.

The mayor's timeline shows the council approving the construction contract in January 2015. Work would begin in early 2015 and finish in mid-2016.

Swearingin finished the staff presentation by reading from a Los Angeles Times article about the mall's demise. The article went on and on about shops closing early and the absence of shoppers.

The article was published April 28, 1988, Swearingin said.

"Take action, council," Swearingin said. "Do not let another 26 years go by."

Public comments began at 7:20 p.m. The first speakers said they supported opening the mall to vehicle traffic.

Al Smith, head of the Greater Fresno Area Chamber of Commerce, said he supports Swearingin's plan. He listed all the underutilized high-rises on the mall. "Without change, all those will be the equivalent of tombstones," Smith said.

But mall supporters urged the council to reject Swearingin's proposals.

Dixie Salazar, a Fresno artist, said the mall didn't fail. "The city of Fresno failed the mall," she said.

Salazar said the mall is a historical resource that deserves restoration, much like the Fresno City College Old Administration Building. "Once the mall is gone, it's gone," she said.

Kiel Schmidt asked the council to restore a third option to the mix: Keep the mall but refurbish it for the 21st century. "There are cost-effective ways to restore the mall," Schmidt said.

Thursday afternoon, the council tackled a handful of issues connected to downtown revitalization.

During a half-hour workshop on Measure C's Transit-Oriented Development funds, Fresno Council of Governments Executive Director Tony Boren and COG senior planner Kristine Cai explained how the money from the countywide sales tax measure is designed to improve life and transportation in high-density neighborhoods.

TOD money was a key part of the evening hearing. Swearingin wants to use \$1.8 million of TOD funds as the city's match for a federal grant that would pay for restoring vehicular traffic to the mall.

The council on Thursday afternoon gave the green light to city officials to submit applications for TOD money that would be spent on infrastructure projects in the Cultural Arts District. That district is located north of the mall.

The council also approved a contract for \$148,869 to hire a consultant who would design new Fresno Area Express bus stops in downtown.



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