

Janice Stevens: It was night of green, orange and split loyalty

<http://www.fresnobee.com/2014/03/07/3809790/it-was-night-of-green-orange-and.html>

By Janice Stevens

Valley Voices

March 7, 2014

Sporting bold orange T-shirts in support of Option 1, the plan to open six blocks of the Fulton Corridor to vehicular traffic, Pat Hunter and I joined others dressed in orange in the Fresno City Council Chambers at City Hall. With what Mayor Ashley Swearengin described as a "historic crowd ... for a historic evening," we lined the sides of the chambers to experience what would be a long night of presentations and public opinions — pro and con.

My thoughts wandered while waiting for the meeting to begin. I remembered gathering on the Fulton Mall at the famous Jan De Swart Clock Tower in September 2013 when the TIGER grant of \$16 million was announced with a requirement that it be used to restore traffic.

I embraced the vision of a revitalized downtown and wrote a Valley Voices column saying we should write a new Fulton chapter.

Caught up in the moment of an impending decision at the big meeting, I yearned to join the green shirts in support of maintaining the historic mall. The green shirts represented friends in the artists' community and historic preservation, and I felt a disloyalty to both.

Pat, a longtime supporter and contributor to the San Joaquin River Parkway, stopped Coke Hollowell as she passed us in the aisle, and said, "Can we still be friends?" Coke, dressed in green in support of preserving the mall, said, "Of course. You're just wearing the wrong color."

That tugged.

We yearned for the Fulton Mall to be what it was in its glory days and remember walking the six blocks with our architect friend Bob Dyer, who was involved with implementing the Gruen Plan. I listened in awe while he pointed to the architecturally significant facades and cartouches adorning the historical high-rises.

That night, I heard the words of Dixie Salazar: "The Fulton Mall didn't fail. The city failed the Mall." The Gruen plan did not materialize, and the addition of the Fashion Fair mall played into Fulton Mall's demise.

However, the testimonies of business owners, investors and others who frequent the Fulton Corridor supported our choice. We stand on the side of preserving the treasured and priceless art as presented in Option 1 and believe it is the best answer to conserve and protect the art and sustain our historical legacy for the future. Today, unfortunately, valued world-renowned art pieces have been vandalized, with willful disrespect and destruction, and once opulent buildings remain shuttered. Absent change, it would only continue.

Option 1 is a win-win as Fresno moves toward a thriving and robust center core. Consider the Cultural Arts District north of the Fulton Mall where murals, galleries and new contemporary living spaces have taken hold. Consider the downtown ArtHop. It is the first Thursday night of the month and it teems with artists and art appreciators. Does this not suggest the potential for a newly opened Fulton Street?

The energy and enthusiasm of a new generation was evident in the chambers that historic night. These young people are eager to move forward toward a thriving downtown, one where they intend to invest their financial and creative interests.

Heritage Fresno will conduct a walking tour of the mall on April 5 led by Craig Scharton. It begins at the Clock Tower and culminates at his business, Peeve's Public House, at the west end of the mall.

Here the public will see artists, historians and others who appreciate the legacy of the Fulton Mall set aside their orange and green shirts and walk in unity to revisit the historical bounty that originated with the founding of our city.

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