

Failed CVS project sends positive message about Fulton Corridor

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Posted by George Hostetter on March 18, 2014

A proposed downtown construction project has gone belly-up. But the failed effort adds heft to downtown revitalization advocate Craig Scharton's favorite theme: Big-time change is coming to the Fulton Corridor.

The project involved the southwest corner of Tuolumne Street and Van Ness Avenue. This site is close to the CVS drug store and parking lot. It's also home to a funky bit of curving street that was once part of the transportation scheme devised in the early 1960s by urban architect Victor Gruen for his downtown "super block."

The current CVS store is on the north end of Fulton Mall. The front doors face north, toward Warnors Theatre, not west toward the mall. The building has all the charm of an army weapons bunker.

CVS officials in 2013 pitched an idea to City Hall. They would build a new 15,424-square-foot store, but it would be right on the corner of Tuolumne and Van Ness. There would be a new parking lot. The store would have a drive-thru pharmacy service. The store would sell beer, wine and hard booze (for consumption off the premises). The place would be open 24/7. The old building would be leased to a new tenant.

The District 3 Plan Implementation Committee the previous year had given the project a thumbs up. The city's planning director last July said A-OK to the project.

City Hall soon got two letters of appeal. One was from Cliff Tutelian, president of Uptown Investments and owner of The Grand 1401, the former PG&E building on the northwest corner of Tuolumne and Fulton. The other was from Fresno attorney Justin Campagne representing the Fresno Housing Authority. The Housing Authority is located across Fulton Mall from the CVS store.

Tutelien and the Housing Authority described their concerns in legalese. They mentioned California Environmental Quality Act issues. But their bottom line was simple: The CVS vision doesn't fit into what Fulton Corridor is destined to become.

The thinking: Suburban strip malls have 24/7 drug stores with a pharmacy drive-thru. The feds aren't spending \$16 million to help turn Fulton Mall into Fulton Street, and Mayor Ashley Swarengin isn't spending millions of city funds and putting her political reputation on the line, merely to transform a key corner of the six-block Fulton corridor into something common to intersections in just about every incorporated city in the Valley.

The Tutelian/Housing Authority appeals went to the Planning Commission on Jan. 15, 2014. The Planning Department's staff report this time said the project should die.

The city owns the funky curving street where part of the new store was to go. Selling that land to CVS "would not be in the best interest of the City of Fresno," the report said.

What is that interest? I quote from the staff report:

"The reason for this decision is because the subject site has special importance due to its location at one of the four corners of the Central Business District/Fulton Mall area. With major historic buildings across the street, the Fulton side of the site is a future opportunity for a 100% corner, particularly as traffic is restored on Fulton Street. The City believes that development on the site should explicitly anticipate this future, rather than making it harder to achieve as this project does. Additionally, this is an area where the City wants to maximize pedestrian traffic. Buildings should be designed to provide a strong interface with adjacent sidewalks, particularly at corners, and particularly at corners that mark one's arrival to the Central Business District."

The report goes on to note that City Hall "is experiencing high levels of interest in development along other blocks of the Fulton Mall. Consistent with the character of the area, these are all multi-story projects. Finally, the City believes that all of the ingredients (including the necessary market demand and potential development partners) are in place for a multi-use development that includes housing or office uses, with CVS as the anchor retailer."

The planning commissioners agreed with Tutelian, the Housing Authority and staff. By a 7-0 vote, this version of a CVS project was killed. Swearingin or District 3 Council Member Oliver Baines could have appealed to the City Council within 15 days. They didn't.

It seems like time stopped on Fulton Mall in about 1990. The CVS tale suggests Fulton Corridor is getting ready for the 21st century.

George Hostetter, a Fresno Bee reporter since 1987, knows Fresno and the trappings of its government from the top of his hat to the tip of his shoes, which he wears out with round trips between the office and City Hall.