

# Urban developer Aaron Blair ready to tackle downtown Fresno challenge

[fb fresnobee.com /2014/07/27/4043728/downtown-fresno-has-a-new-champion.html](http://fresnobee.com/2014/07/27/4043728/downtown-fresno-has-a-new-champion.html)

By George Hostetter



Aaron Blair, the new chief executive of the Downtown Fresno Partnership, is pictured in front of one of the many sculptures on the west end of the Fulton Mall on July 24, 2014.

MARK CROSSE — THE FRESNO BEE [Buy Photo](#)

Downtown Fresno has a new advocate-in-chief — just in time for a new era of challenges.

Urban-development veteran Aaron Blair is president/chief executive of Downtown Fresno Partnership, the property owner-funded nonprofit dedicated to revitalizing the central business district. He replaced Kate Borders, who resigned in March to take a similar position in Tempe, Ariz.

Blair, in charge since mid-July, is tackling a steep learning curve with a two-part strategy.

He plans to talk to as many people as possible about downtown's future.

He vows to read every downtown revitalization plan he can get his hands on — more than a half-century of written dreams.

"I'll focus in the next six months on taking input from all sides, and trying to get people to a place where we're all pushing in the same direction," Blair said. "We want to make sure everyone knows downtown is the heartbeat of our community. It works for everyone if downtown continues to progress."

Blair, 39, comes to Fresno from Albany, Ga., where he was the downtown city manager. He was instrumental in recruiting about 30 new businesses to the area and attracting \$4 million in private investment. He also had been executive director of the Albany-Dougherty Inner City Authority. His duties included the redevelopment of the downtown Albany area.

Blair grew up in Columbus, Ohio. He received a bachelor's degree in urban planning from the University of Cincinnati. He and his wife, Jessica, have two teenage daughters.

'So much going on'

"When we came here, my wife and I fell in love with Fresno," Blair said. "The downtown is amazing. There is so much going on."

Of his annual salary, Blair said only that it's in the \$90,000 range.

Downtown Fresno Partnership is a property-based business improvement district covering a substantial part of downtown. Property owners tax themselves, pool their money and devise strategies to spur downtown vitality.

The district is approaching its fourth birthday and has had successes. It puts up an ice rink in the middle of Fulton Mall during the winter holiday season. Its ambassadors program features roving downtown guides to help visitors find their way. It produces events such as the Market on Kern, Cinco de Mayo, Sudz in the City and the Downtown Christmas Parade.

Property owners said they would give the district a five-year trial run. Blair said a priority is to get the renewal campaign off to a strong start.

It's an odd-shaped district in an odd-shaped downtown. Downtown Fresno is generally defined as the region within the triangle of three freeways — highways 99, 41 and 180. But the Downtown Fresno Partnership has different ideas: City Hall is in, but the Meux Home a few steps to the north is out. Warnors Theatre on the southern edge of Uptown is in, but nearby Assemi family housing projects aren't. Selland Arena on the north side of Ventura Avenue is in, but the proposed Old Armenian Town on the south side of Ventura isn't.

Politics explains the contrast. Now that the Partnership has a worthy track record, Blair said, he will explore whether some property owners on the outside have changed their minds.

Focus on Fulton Mall

Fulton Mall is in, and it's the fate of this area, now a pedestrian walkway, that will make or break the district.

The City Council this year voted to reconstruct what City Hall calls the Fulton Corridor, returning two-way vehicular traffic to the six blocks between Tuolumne and Inyo streets for the first time in a half-century.

Mayor Ashley Swearengin, the most forceful advocate for the change, says she has lined up \$20 million to foot the bill for construction. The feds, once champions of the mall concept, are forking over nearly \$16 million.

No one disputes that the mall doesn't live up to its original promise. The dispute is over a solution.

Swearingin makes no claims that cars, by themselves, will produce magic. She does claim cars will add a dynamism that private-sector ambition will learn to harvest in a way that rejuvenates the city's center.

Preservationists are suing the city to stop the project. They say environmental safeguards were shortchanged. They say the mall merely needs repair and modernization to deliver the long-promised urban renaissance.

All this adds two burdens on Partnership CEO Blair as he hustles to learn the mall's layout.

Sept. 1 is just around the corner. That will mark the 50th anniversary of the mall's opening, a show that attracted then-Gov. Edmund G. Brown and top federal officials from Washington, D.C. The Downtown Fresno Partnership already is on record in support of a return of cars.

Blair said he and his staff will figure out a way to acknowledge the historic day in 1964 without suggesting the mall should stay as is.

"You honor the things about the mall that are positive and show how those things that people love about the mall will be reconnected into the new street," Blair said.

Scharton's role

And Fulton Corridor politics figure to get even hotter. That's where Craig Scharton is coming to Blair's aid.

Scharton is the former downtown revitalization czar for Swearingin who resigned last year to open Peeve's Public House on the mall. He was the Partnership's interim chief executive after Borders left for Tempe. He now is the Partnership's Fulton Mall manager.

It's a part-time job, with hours and duties still to be worked out. But there is no doubt about Scharton's mission — get Fulton Mall turned into Fulton Street.

There are politicians, city planners, business owners, property owners, consumers, contractors and critics to woo, mollify and combat for months on end.

"It could be a fairly tricky endeavor," Scharton said. He had no need to add that he has decades of experience in Fresno with such delicate endeavors.

Scharton brings another benefit to Blair. Both preach the growing energy of downtown. Scharton does so with the conviction of someone who actually has seen it.

Downtown revitalization, Scharton said, "is happening now. To anyone who has doubts, I tell them to come down here on a Friday or a Saturday night. Who's coming to downtown? They're already here."

The reporter can be reached at (559) 441-6272 or [ghostetter@fresnobee.com](mailto:ghostetter@fresnobee.com) or @GeorgeHostetter on Twitter.