

Jill Fields: Not so fast -- Fulton Mall's fate still up for debate

By Jill
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Fresno's Fulton Mall and its world-class art collection have remained remarkably free from vandalism throughout its 50-year history, despite what appears to be the willful neglect of this unique site by current and past administrations.

Thus, when my friend recently noticed spray paint on this award-winning urban park's pedestrian walkways, she knew it was unlikely the act of a misguided teen and instead feared the worst: that a city worker had started marking out the destruction of this landmark location. Thankfully, after asking around, she learned the paint was left over from a holiday event. But if it had been put there for the reason she feared, would it have been any more legal than the typical graffiti most folks consider an eyesore and can result in arrest?

Contrary to the city's efforts to convince everyone otherwise, the Fulton Mall debate is not over and that question has yet to be resolved. Therefore any destruction of the Fulton Mall's integrity should not be taking place.

Though the Downtown Fresno Partnership has started planning a "groundbreaking," no ground can legally be broken until the city meets a number of conditions set by the Fresno City Council on that fateful day last February.

That was when a majority of its members voted to destroy the award-winning mall based on the idea that what Fresno needs is more traffic, more particulate pollution from cars, and more asphalt, and fewer parks, fewer places to walk, and fewer internationally-renowned destinations filled with great art a block from the forthcoming high-speed rail station.

With that kind of smarts why is anyone surprised that quips characterizing our town as the nation's armpit are still commonly broadcast?

More to the point, Councilmember Lee Brand proposed and the City Council passed his amendment to the mayor's destruction plan along with their vote to bring on the bulldozers. The Brand Amendment states that the project can not go forward until several conditions are met, including that all legal challenges to destroying the mall are resolved, that all funding sources are confirmed, and that the project utilizes no local taxes.

Perhaps the destroyers are still in the dark (ages) on the facts, but there is a little something going on called a federal lawsuit, plus the recent local legal challenge that went their way is being appealed. Moreover, the \$2-\$3 million in state funding that Mayor Ashley Swearingen touted when claiming last year, don't worry folks all expenses paid, didn't exist then and doesn't exist now.

In other words, there is a serious funding gap to enacting her big vision to erase a local landmark and replace it with that great 21st century innovation, a street for automobiles. This is well-known to the mayor and her staff because the Department of Transportation contract they signed on behalf of the city to accept the \$16 million TIGER grant (yes, Tea Partiers, all federal dollars are stimulus dollars) stipulates \$0/0% funding from the state and \$3.8 million/19% in local funding for the project.

Those figures may reference as well the U.S. government requirement that Fresno find at least 20% in non-federal matching funds to receive the TIGER grant. Is that also why Swearingen's proposed budget included over \$42 million in local funds dedicated to destroying the Fulton Mall and putting in a street? Whether that particular question ever gets answered, this buried line item appears to be an additional end run around the Brand Amendment and the stringent fiscal oversight it was supposed to guarantee.

So, sorry out of town developers et al., but you haven't yet accomplished bringing us more bad air days. The

immigrant-owned businesses on the mall and their patrons, Fresno art lovers, the disabled, and Cart Hoppers are not yet evicted by broken walkways and holes in the ground where beautiful sculptures and fountains once stood to be enjoyed and appreciated. The wrecking ball – and the spray paint – need to remain on hold.

The Fulton Mall, one of Fresno's few sites listed on the California Register of Historic Places, is still ours to wander in peace and passionately protect.

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