

# Clinton Olivier: Check out new, improved Blackstone Avenue's makeover

By Clinton J.  
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Humorist and author Mark Twain is often remembered as having said, "The reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated."

The same sentiment can be applied to Fresno's main street, Blackstone Avenue. That's because no matter how many times the big street, especially the southern part, is counted out and put down, it keeps coming back.

Blackstone is in the middle of a renaissance of epic proportion, one that is delivering jobs, a more attractive landscape and better prices on goods and services for all of us.

Blackstone's condition has been a hot topic lately. Everyone has an opinion about how the street should look and what kinds of products should be offered there. While the debate rages on, progress is already being made. Fresnoans are deciding what the street should look like. The economic demand we all play a part in generating is causing local and national businesses alike to take notice of central and south Fresno. The result: Blackstone is taking on a different appearance, as those same companies pour millions of dollars into refurbishing old buildings and constructing new ones.

As Blackstone reinvents itself, we reap the benefits. Best of all, the exciting transformation is occurring without taxpayer subsidy, has nothing to do with government mandates and has everything to do with the free market.

Take, for example, the newest addition. Love them or hate them, Walmart has resurrected the old Mervyn's at the corner of Blackstone and Ashlan avenues, breathing new life into central Fresno. After Mervyn's left, the building and lot sat unused for years. Now, 300 people are working in a store that is generating economic activity and tax revenue for the city and county of Fresno.

The list goes on. At McKinley and Blackstone avenues, Taco Bell recently spent tens of thousands of dollars to remodel and beautify its existing restaurant, and O'Reilly Auto Parts constructed and opened a brand-new store. Trendy Dutch Bros. Coffee took over an old drive-through burger stand, refurbished it and is now serving coffee to Fresno City College students and south Fresnoans who need a caffeinated pick-me-up. The locally owned franchise hired more than two dozen workers and has plans to hire more before becoming a 24-hour operation.

Good things are also happening at the southwest corner of Blackstone and Clinton avenues. The lots that used to be home to Happy Steak restaurant and a handful of old houses are now a boarded-up, blighted mess. They are dark, unsafe, and more often than not, full of trash.

Enter Smart & Final. The chain already has three locations in Fresno, one downtown and two others — you guessed it, north of Shaw Avenue. Recognizing that there are profits to be made by setting up shop in the south, the company wants to make the troubled corner its new home.

The retailer plans to clear away the blight and build a Smart & Final Extra, a full-service grocery store featuring fresh meats and fruits and vegetables. About 20 full-time and dozens of part-time jobs will be created, in addition to the construction manpower needed to build the facility. I applaud the company's leadership for doing business in Fresno, and especially for choosing the south, where jobs, economic activity and healthy food choices are so badly needed.

With the support of the Chamber of Commerce and nearby residents, the project is wending its way through City Hall,

where it will have its day before the council this spring.

There are a number of factors that go into selecting an area in which to build. Each company has a formula that includes analysis of population and housing density in a given area and traffic volume, as well as the surrounding neighborhood's annual household income. Could the avalanche of activity on Blackstone Avenue be an indicator that central and south Fresno are on their way back? It certainly appears that way.

Sadly, there are still those who drive Blackstone Avenue with vision clouded by pessimism. These people will never see the beauty of a tire store owner refurbishing the outside of his shop, nor would they ever smile should the furniture store get a snazzy new sign. People like this don't rejoice when a new business moves in or when an old one survives another year.

Yes, Blackstone has challenges we will deal with for decades to come, but it's my job to face those issues optimistically, and not just rant about them as I drive down the street wearing blinders.

Clinton J. Olivier represents District 7 on the Fresno City Council.

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