

Blackstone Avenue project sparks Fresno City Hall fight

By George
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A dead pine tree stands next to a graffiti-marred sign at a closed Chinese restaurant at the southwest corner of Blackstone and Clinton, the site of a proposed Smart & Final and other development. The four acres “now represent everything that’s wrong with Fresno,” Council Member Clint Olivier says.

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Fresno City Hall is a house divided over a grocery store proposed for Blackstone Avenue.

It has come — the first big test for Mayor Ashley Swearingin’s general plan. Who is in Fresno’s development saddle, business as usual or high ideals?

Smart & Final, a chain of warehouse-style grocery/supply stores, wants to build a store on the southwest corner of Blackstone and Clinton Avenue in central Fresno.

The project, based on Fresno’s past, is as conventional as it gets. The site covers four acres. The store is 28,000 square feet, not “big box” territory but plenty big. The parking lot is fit for an armada of cars. And two smaller buildings, both for retail, are to round out the consumer choices.

But Fresno-style development tradition has lost favor these days in the mayor’s office, and those two smaller buildings may soon reveal whether the same sentiment holds sway on the City Council dais.

Swearingin wants both buildings located cheek-by-jowl with the Blackstone sidewalk, the better to conform to a general plan vision that puts a premium on urban ambiance and pedestrian friendliness.

Smart & Final, keen to have Blackstone traffic get maximum visibility of its store, can stomach just one of the smaller buildings going to the front of the street.

Both sides seek compromise as long as it means getting their way.

“Who knows more about retail, Smart & Final or the city of Fresno?” says Council Member Clint Olivier, whose district includes the project site. “In a case like this, I always side with the business owner. I always side with the free market.”

As things stand now, City Manager Bruce Rudd says, “staff isn’t going to recommend this project as it’s proposed.” He says the other side refuses “to meet us halfway.”

The Planning Commission is slated to review the project on Wednesday. The issue almost certainly will move next to the council.

Three factors run through this story:

- There is the project itself. Smart & Final isn’t the developer. That risk is shouldered by Southern California-based Rich Development. Everyone agrees this corner of Clinton and Blackstone desperately needs help.
- Swearingin says that help is found in the 2035 general plan. Some six years in the making, Fresno’s new blueprint for growth gained its local fame by promising to end sprawl. Supporters say the plan’s essence is the transformative power of new development goals for long-neglected inner-city neighborhoods. Swearingin says the plan doesn’t work if it’s simply words on paper.
- The 2035 general plan was approved in December by a divided council. Some council members since then have preached the virtues of flexible rules. That was the worry all along of general plan advocates.

The ink on the general plan is barely dry, yet the council and the mayor already are in a fight over its implementation.

Says Council Member Lee Brand: “This is the first of many.”

A corner to save

The southwest corner of Blackstone and Clinton, Olivier says, “is blight.”

But the intersection as a whole shows some resolve. There’s a modern Save Mart supermarket on the northwest corner and a nice-looking Walgreens drug store on the northeast corner.

This part of Blackstone is a storied part of Fresno’s past. Carl Pilegard, whose Jensen & Pilegard store (feed/farm supply in the old days, now includes garden/power equipment) is a venerable fixture in downtown, decided in 1951 to open a second store on Blackstone just a bit north of Clinton to take advantage of the changing market. Ronald and Virginia Flautz ran their popular Flautz Party Donuts from 1972 to 1982 in a shop not far away.

The Smart & Final site is bounded on three sides by Blackstone, Clinton and Vassar Avenue. Glenn Avenue is the block’s west boundary. The project site covers most of the block.

There is an old, abandoned Happy Steak building at Blackstone/Clinton and a tire shop at Blackstone/Vassar. There are a few houses, at least one empty, and lots of weeds on the site.

The four acres “now represent everything that’s wrong with Fresno,” Olivier says. “This project represents everything that’s right.”

Southern California-based Smart & Final already has stores in the Fresno-Clovis area and traces its heritage back to the 19th century. Rich Development isn’t a stranger to Fresno, either. It counts the El Paseo shopping center in the

northwest corner of town among local successes.

A Smart & Final spokeswoman on Friday said in an email that company officials didn't have time to respond to Bee questions.

City Hall and project sources describe events this way:

Smart & Final, as the anchor tenant, calls the shots. The company is successful, generating several billion dollars in annual sales, mostly in the western U.S. Its business model calls for a large building on about three acres with parking in front and nothing to obscure the storefront or signature signs from passing motorists.

The impulse shopper — “Hey, there's Smart & Final. Let's drop in.” — is important to the company. According to city records, the weekday traffic volume on Blackstone north of Clinton averages about 20,000 vehicles a day. City officials say traffic is heavier on the weekends. By contrast, the weekday traffic volume on Blackstone at Bullard Avenue is about 31,000 vehicles a day.

Rich Development has four acres. It made a pitch to Smart & Final to make use of the extra land: Add a restaurant of about 3,000 square feet and a building of about 4,800 square feet for three or four small businesses (nail salon, perhaps, and a barber shop).

City Hall initially wanted the Smart & Final store along the Blackstone sidewalk, with parking in the rear. Smart & Final and Rich Development said no. City Hall relented.

But, city officials said, the other two buildings need to be along Blackstone. The avenue is to be a major corridor of development, spurred by a new bus rapid transit system designed to get more people out of their cars. The Smart & Final project as proposed just doesn't cut it, city officials said.

Rich Development already was thinking along these lines for the restaurant. It's too soon to say what type of restaurant will go there, but no one disputes it will have a drive-thru. These restaurants generally do best when located close to the street.

Smart & Final relented on the restaurant's location. But the company refused to bend on the other building. Its location must remain next to the main store.

A retail term, “viewshed,” is pivotal to Smart & Final's thinking. What can a potential customer driving north or south on Blackstone see easily while passing the southwest corner of Blackstone and Clinton?

Smart & Final said two buildings, however modest in size, along the approximately 270 feet of Blackstone between Clinton and Vassar would destroy too much of the motorist's viewshed. This, Smart & Final said, is a deal-killer.

The viewshed of the Smart & Final store on the corner of H Street and Ventura Avenue, in the shadow of the Poverell House and the Fresno Rescue Mission, might seem less than perfect.

Greg Vena, Rich Development senior vice president for acquisitions and development, says the past is irrelevant to Smart & Final decision-makers.

“The way they did things in 1985 or 1990 has no bearing on how they determine store locations in 2015,” Vena says.

A city to save

Swearingin made the general plan into a star.

Fresno's growth blueprints date back to the early 1950s when City Hall realized such plans were the ticket to big piles of federal urban-renewal bucks.

Sometimes the plans arrived with something approaching regularity. Sometimes decades passed. The city, after a nearly 20-year hiatus, adopted a new general plan in 2002. Hardly anyone noticed. Fresno was preoccupied with a new downtown baseball stadium.

Swearingin saw yet another general plan as the way to change entrenched attitudes.

First, an updated blueprint would be the founding document to halt, or at least dramatically slow, growth on city edges. The inner city would be reborn, thanks to the latest advances in urban planning.

Second, and perhaps most important, Swearingin saw creation of the new plan (guiding Fresno to 2035) as a years-long journey. She would court as many of the city's political, cultural and ethnic/racial factions as possible. Even if the buy-in wasn't 100%, she figured, public support for the finished product would be broad enough to marginalize any coalition trying to undermine the plan's fundamentals.

The strategy looked sound in the beginning. The council chamber was packed in spring 2012 when council members chose an anti-sprawl theme for the general plan. The chamber was again full last December when the plan became law. Only Olivier and then-Council President Steve Brandau voted no.

The plan's third chapter — "Urban Form, Land Use, and Design" — may be the most important.

The goal, says the introduction, is to focus "on establishing a structural framework for the city, enhancing the character of neighborhoods and districts, creating vibrant centers of activity and a public realm that is engaging and livable, crafting a tapestry of distinctive, connected communities, and strengthening Fresno's identity and sense of place."

The Smart & Final project betrays this vision, Rudd says.

"The reason this community looks like it does in some places is that we've been fine with the idea of 'I don't care what the project is. Something is better than nothing,'" Rudd says. "So, we just settle."

Rudd says the Swearingin administration, backed by a half-dozen years of community input, is done with unconditional settling.

"Our view is further out than what we can get today," Rudd says. "It's more about what we do today and its impact on tomorrow."

Settling on a boss

Swearingin and council members alike say execution, not daydreaming, will make or break the new general plan.

The next month or so may determine whether the mayor or the council is in charge of Fresno's land-use policy.

The planning commission's debate is little more than a preliminary. If the commissioners love the project as currently proposed, Swearingin most likely will take it to the council. If the commissioners go the other way, Olivier will take things to the Main Event.

Rudd says the administration isn't about to dump the general plan solely to secure a Smart & Final store.

Olivier says the Smart & Final project will be one of many steps in turning Blackstone "into a cleaned-up, safer version of what we have now."

Brand might be the swing vote. He voted for the general plan. He has mayoral ambitions in 2016. He counts prudence and practicality among his political strengths.

Brand has a warning for the administration.

The Smart & Final project, he says, “is the wrong sword to fall on.”

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