

Smart & Final, Mayor Swearingin pursue peace on Blackstone project

By George
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Graffiti-marred sign of a closed Chinese restaurant, originally a Happy Steak, and planters filled with weeds, are 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. “This project represents everything that’s right.” JOHN WALKER — THE FRESNO BEE | [Buy Photo](#)

The controversy surrounding the Smart & Final project in central Fresno may be losing its fizz.

The Planning Commission on Wednesday agreed at the developer’s request to postpone debate on the retail project for two weeks.

The administration of Mayor Ashley Swearingin and Southern California-based Rich Development have been knocking heads over the layout of proposed stores at the southwest corner of Blackstone and Clinton avenues.

Smart & Final, a Southern California-based chain of warehouse-style grocery/supply stores, is to be the anchor tenant.

Swearingin and Rich Development now have until April 1 to reach a compromise that transforms a rezoning application from bitter fight to boring paperwork.

“I think we’ll be able to find a way to meet the needs of the developer and his tenants as well as the general plan,”

City Manager Bruce Rudd said after the meeting.

Council Member Clint Olivier, who represents this part of town, said he applauds the spirit of compromise.

“We can’t let the word get out that Fresno isn’t the right place to do business,” said Olivier, a supporter of the developer’s plan. “We’ll do whatever it takes to revitalize our city and provide jobs.”

Several factors are at play.

The most obvious is the site itself. The four acres include weeds and boarded-up buildings. The other three corners at Blackstone/Clinton are full of life.

Then there’s the Rich Development vision. The developer sees a Smart & Final store of about 27,000 square feet, plenty of parking, a restaurant at Blackstone/Clinton and a relatively small building for several shops. Only the restaurant would front onto Blackstone. The developer says keeping the front of the site uncluttered is key to Smart & Final’s business model.

There’s also the mayor’s pride and the city’s new general plan.

The latter is a growth blueprint that puts a premium along major commercial streets on retail located next to sidewalks. This makes for a more vibrant urban experience, planning experts say.

Swearingin is staking her mayoral legacy on the general plan’s wisdom and successful implementation. She would love to see Rich Development’s smaller retail building located next to Blackstone, not deep within the site.

There’s the rub: How many buildings hugging Blackstone’s sidewalk?

Finally, there is City Hall’s sometimes incomprehensible and always politically charged procedure. Bottom line: If the rezone application should make its way to the City Council for a final decision, Swearingin may lose the battle unconditionally but there’s no telling if Rich Development and Smart & Final (both fond of the Fresno market) might someday rue their victory.

Said Rudd: “I’m very optimistic we’re going to find something everyone can move forward with.”

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