

Hundreds celebrate downtown Fresno's revitalization at State of Downtown 2015

By Rory
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Mayor Ashley Swearengin amused the audience Thursday at the State of Downtown 2015 event by reading disparaging tweets about downtown Fresno. THEFRESNOBEE

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Hundreds of sharply dressed Fresno leaders and community members packed into the beautiful Pacific Southwest Building just a few feet away from businesses with barred windows and people sleeping on benches in the Fulton Mall on Thursday evening to celebrate the renewal of downtown Fresno.



Guests passed by armed security guards and a large chalkboard urging them to write how they plan to make a difference in downtown.

Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin, Fresno State President Joseph Castro and Downtown Fresno Partnership CEO Aaron Blair did most of the talking at the event, which was catered exclusively by downtown businesses. The leaders explained what steps their organizations were taking to continue growing the area.

“Revitalizing downtown has been my No. 1 goal,” Swearengin said. “The big, important decisions have already happened. Now we just need reap the benefits.”

State of Downtown 2015 had a much different atmosphere than the first event held in 2010, Swearengin said, because of what’s been accomplished in the last five years. She credited the work of local business owners, the Downtown Fresno Partnership and the Fresno City Council’s decision to open up the Fulton Mall to car traffic last year with greatly improving conditions.

“The last and greatest battle will be changing the mindset of Fresno residents,” said Swearengin, who then read an assortment of negative tweets berating downtown. “Think about how you can enchant the vision of downtown Fresno within your own network.”

Blair announced the formation of the Downtown Fresno Foundation, which he says will “focus on supporting economic development” in the area.

The declaration was accompanied by information on two competitions hosted by the new foundation. The first will award a free consultation with an interior designer and free renovations to a downtown restaurant.

The other competition asks residents to submit their dream business plans for a chance to win a start-up package valued at \$100,000. The applications are due by Aug. 14, and more information is available at downtownfresno.org/foundation.

One Putt Broadcasting President and Fresno ArtHop champion John Ostlund received the Al Allen award for his commitment to downtown Fresno. Ostlund’s introduction prompted the only standing ovation of the night as he made his way to the podium.

“I don’t know why I’m so infected with downtown Fresno,” Ostlund said.

Castro used his time to explain how Fresno State plans to continue its support of the downtown area. Chief among these, Castro said, was the university “developing the human capital of downtown Fresno and the Central Valley,” meaning the students.

Castro said the school also plans to work closely with downtown Fresno technology company Bitwise Industries to upgrade its campus. Fresno State will also offer continuing education classes at Bitwise and fine arts programming at the M Street Art Complex.

However, all three speakers heaped praise onto downtown Fresno business owners.

Pablo Orozco owns Raizana Tea Co. near the Warnors Theater with his wife, Sol. His business has operated in downtown Fresno for two years and will expand into a neighboring open property this month.

“(This year’s event) had some really nice momentum,” Orozco said. “We don’t have to sell it to people so much — just offer friendly reminders of what we’re doing and what’s left to be done.”

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