

## Blackstone Avenue Smart & Final deal dead

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Written by George Lurie

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A Southern California developer has pulled out of a deal to build a Smart & Final on Blackstone and Clinton avenues in Fresno. A Southern California-based developer has pulled out of a proposed deal to build a new Smart & Final-anchored shopping center at the southwest corner of Blackstone and Clinton avenues.

"Smart & Final decided not to pursue that location," said Greg Vena, senior vice president of acquisition and development for Rich Development.

"We were hoping to have the process go a little smoother," Vena added.

In late March, the Fresno Planning Commission delayed a vote to approve the project, saying city officials and the developer were still negotiating setback standards and the location of the parking lot for the proposed warehouse-style grocery store as well as a restaurant and retail complex.

City officials said Rich's initial rezoning application did not conform with the city's new General Plan, which emphasizes "walk-ability" and dictates retail business entrances be located near sidewalks.

"The new General Plan amendment complicated things a bit," Vena said. "What we thought was a compromise still did not satisfy Smart & Final and they decided to pursue another [development] site in the Fresno area that did not require as many approvals from the city."

"It was a business decision," said Tony Bernardini, group vice president of real estate for Smart & Final. "We think we may be able to find something that is going to work a little better for us in Fresno."

Bernardini said he called Mayor Ashley Swearengin to give her the news. "I wanted to let her know we are still very much committed to the Fresno market," he said.

The developer's most-recent proposal to the city called for locating the 27,000-square-foot Smart & Final entrance some distance from the sidewalk on Blackstone.

The developer also wanted to build a 3,100-square-foot restaurant and 4,800 square feet of inline retail space on the four-acre parcel, which currently is home to a number of boarded up buildings and patches of weeds.

Rich Development is currently involved in several large projects in the area, including the 400,000-square-foot Marketplace at El Paseo in northwest Fresno and a new Family Dollar store.

The company still hopes to redevelop the Blackstone and Clinton avenues site.

"We're trying to figure out what else we can do there," said Vena. "We still see it as an opportunity if we can find a good anchor tenant."

"We're sorry the developer couldn't find a way to make this site work for Smart & Final," said Mark Standriff, City of Fresno spokesman.

"Fortunately, it's not the end of the story," Standriff added. "Our discussions with Smart & Final continue to be productive, especially when it comes to the Blackstone corridor and we look forward to helping them expand their business here in Fresno."