

City Hall, artists push for Mariposa Plaza makeover

By George
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The Mariposa Plaza Activation Project, involves a redesign of the plaza to make cultural and performance events more feasible to produce. An emphasis will also be put on new artworks for the plaza. A grant from the National Endowment for the Arts is helping pay for this. Video by John Walker THEFRESNOBEE

- *Fresno officials want the community's help to redesign Mariposa Plaza.*
- *A grant from the National Endowment for the Arts will jump-start the effort.*
- *A new Mariposa Plaza fits into Mayor Ashley Swearingin's plans for a revitalized downtown.*

Mariposa Plaza is the next downtown landmark in line for a makeover, and Fresno City Hall wants your ideas.

Top city officials joined artists and downtown advocates Wednesday evening in launching an effort to re-energize a familiar gathering place grown a bit musty over the decades.

The city already has a \$150,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Work has begun on finding the required \$150,000 local match.

With \$300,000 in hand, Fresnans will help design a plaza fit for a new century and a new downtown.

Mayor Ashley Swearingin told about 60 people at the Pacific Southwest Building that she looks forward to “cutting the ribbon on a new Mariposa Plaza that perfectly expresses the personality of Fresno for many years to come.”

Council President Oliver Baines, who represents downtown, said an updated plaza will add to “the incredible momentum in our downtown.”

As to what's next, city officials said details are to come. They said the redesign of Mariposa Plaza will involve the imagination, administrative skills and fundraising talents of all sorts of public and private players. Construction will require more of the same.

There's a lot of back story here.

There was no Mariposa Plaza some 60 years ago, only a Mariposa Street that moved people between west Fresno and Courthouse Park. Then city leaders in the late 1950s got serious about revitalizing a downtown feeling the pressure of fast-growing suburbs.

The result by 1964 was a system of pedestrian malls. The north-south Fulton Mall covered six blocks. Much of the east-west Mariposa Street was turned into a mall as well.

A corner of the intersection of Fulton and Mariposa malls turned into Mariposa Plaza, an open space with a modest stage, trees and benches. The stage often gets more use as a free-speech platform than as an entertainment venue.

The NEA grant cheers city officials for several reasons.

The mall system was originally seen as a marvelous spot for public art. Fresnans responded with money and artwork to make this a reality.

But a lot has changed over a half-century in the world of art and entertainment. City Hall wants to modernize the plaza. The plaza, in turn, is part of a much larger downtown revitalization effort.

Swearingin took office in January 2009 vowing to rebuild and rebrand downtown. Those efforts have taken many paths, but perhaps the most controversial is her plan to remove Fulton Mall. Cars would return to the stretch between Tuolumne and Inyo streets that was once Fulton Street.

Swearingin figures it makes no sense to make a big deal out of the rebirth of this portion of Fulton Street, only to leave the corridor burdened with a dated Mariposa Plaza.

Finally, there's the way the NEA grant works in City Hall's hands. Public participation in the design of a new Mariposa Plaza is key. The more ideas, city officials say, the better.

This is the way Swearingin has run her revitalization plans from the beginning.

She pushed hard for a new general plan that focuses on help for older neighborhoods. There were years of public meetings and buy-in before the plan went to the City Council.

She pushed hard for a Bus Rapid Transit system that will make it easier for Fresnans to get to Mariposa Plaza. Again, lots of public input from the get-go.

She wants the area around the proposed bullet-train station to get a makeover. Her first move — seek public opinion.

And now the same concept is at work on Mariposa Plaza.

“This has been our hope and our vision from the beginning, to get all the stakeholders and the entire community involved in the future of downtown,” Swearingin said in an interview Wednesday night. “Downtown doesn't belong to just one council district. Downtown belongs to all of us.”

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