

Clinton J. Olivier: Blackstone needs investment — not meetings and new taxes

By Clinton J.
Olivier

The Smart & Final project at Clinton and Blackstone avenues is officially dead, leaving boarded-up buildings and a dark, unsafe parking lot to stand as a memorial to one of the city of Fresno's biggest missteps in recent memory.

Unfortunately, current market forces indicate that finding a replacement retailer will be like finding a needle in a haystack. This is a case where Fresno's government has let down the same inner-city residents and business owners it is supposed to be supporting by vigorously combating blight and attracting new investment.

The development's failure was actually years in the making. The passage of the controversial 2035 General Plan was hailed by some as a major moment in the city's history because it would redirect the focus of city resources inward — to established neighborhoods. The cornerstone of the plan designates Blackstone Avenue as a special "transit corridor" where, for the first time, the construction of Transit-Oriented Development (apartments) and the pedestrian-friendliness of streets and neighborhoods would be mandated.

The spirit of this plan was a major part of the tug-of-war between Smart & Final's builders and the city. In the end, the process took months and the retailer ended up walking away. We could have used that investment and those jobs in south central Fresno, where, sadly, those things are hard to come by. Going forward, future mayors and councils must decide whether clinging to ideology and land-use fads is more important than neighborhoods, families and jobs.

But far from being settled, the fight for Blackstone has just begun, and business owners should beware. The same people who created the General Plan and helped to scuttle Smart & Final want to convince us that complying with their principles will bring business untold benefits. What's more, their agenda has the potential to eventually cost merchants millions of dollars in new taxes.

The Better Blackstone Association (BBA) is the vehicle they will use to push their agenda. This newly formed group is part of a major push by the Fresno Metro Ministry, a partially government-funded organization dedicated to "social, economic and environmental justice." The BBA is asking business owners to attend a meeting from 6:30-8:30 p.m. today at the Fresno City College Old Administration Building to chime in on the topic of Blackstone's future.

The BBA is headed by the former city of Fresno planning department official who authored the General Plan. According to the group's website, the goal is to continue to push mixed-use housing developments and federally funded rapid-transit systems as the keys to Blackstone's prosperity.

In an early indicator of this group's anti-business agenda in action, a BBA community organizer is on record as recently as a month ago requesting an additional delay of up to 60 days from the Planning Commission to schedule a town-hall style meeting related to Smart & Final. This BBA activist asked for additional information from city planners to be presented "in a non-confrontational way" about the particulars of a project that should have been a no-brainer. She also requested that the developer be publicly grilled. There is a saying in business: "Time kills all deals." Nowhere is that more true than at the corner of Clinton and Blackstone avenues.

Besides missing the mark when it comes to the needs of merchants, the group brings another threat to the table — a Property-Based Improvement District, or PBID. It's a program where business owners are assessed additional taxes to pay for special projects within the district. The BBA's director confirmed to me that a PBID would be included on the "menu of options" that would eventually be presented to business owners. Merchants would have to vote to tax themselves, but even the businesses that vote "no" have to pay up if the district is formed.

It's already being done in downtown Fresno, where a PBID has been in place for a number of years. Trouble is, each place has an individual identity. Strategies that are effective in the Tower District or on the Fulton Mall may not be effective in Pinedale. In this case, additional taxes aren't an appropriate solution for Blackstone, where many businesses are already barely surviving.

The city of Fresno can and should care for Blackstone Avenue's infrastructure without additional taxes. Merchants are already paying business, property, state and federal taxes. A new tax will take money out of the hands of the individuals and put it in the hands of the politicians and the bureaucrats. Oppose it. Community meetings don't put food on the table. Jobs do.

Clinton J. Olivier represents District 7 on the Fresno City Council. Email: District7@fresno.gov.