

Latest Smart and Final project in Fresno is dead — for now

By George
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A closed Chinese restaurant, originally a Happy Steak, at the southwest corner of Blackstone and Clinton, center, next to a tire shop at the site of a proposed Smart & Final. JOHN WALKER — THE FRESNO BEE | [Buy Photo](#)

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- Smart & Final won't develop a store at Blackstone and Clinton.
- Decision causes political finger-pointing.
- Company remains interested in building a store in central Fresno.



Smart & Final doesn't want to be on a certain corner in central Fresno, after all.

It's back to square one in this bumpy lesson about business development in the new Fresno.



The Southern California-based retailer had wanted to build a store on the southwest corner of Blackstone and Clinton avenues, not far from Fresno City College and Ratcliffe Stadium.

A dispute with City Hall popped up over whether the project should have one or two smaller buildings fronting Blackstone. The two sides couldn't settle their differences.

Tony Bernardini, Smart & Final's group vice president for real estate, said the company is now looking for other sites in the same area as well the rest of the city.

"It was a business decision," Bernardini said. "We're very much committed to the Fresno market. Fresno has always

been a great community for Smart & Final.”

Bernardini said Smart & Final has no hard feelings.

“Cities have their plans, and we understand that,” Bernardini said.

Smart & Final already has a handful of stores in the Fresno metropolitan area. City Manager Bruce Rudd said City Hall remains keen on working with the company.

“The signals are they’re still interested in Fresno, but not at this location,” Rudd said.

And so another chapter ends in the fascinating story of Fresno development.

But the council member who represents the Blackstone-Clinton area wants to set the stage for the next installment.

“The question is ‘Why?’” Council Member Clint Olivier said of Smart & Final’s decision. “If it’s because the city of Fresno took too long to process their applications, then the city screwed up and we can never allow this to happen again.”

Only Smart & Final can answer that question, and Bernardini has spoken.

It wasn’t too long ago that the Smart & Final issue was shaping up as one of those land-use donnybrooks at which Fresno excels.

Smart & Final is a chain of warehouse-style grocery/supply stores with several billion dollars in annual sales. Most of its stores are in the western United States.

The site on the southwest corner of Blackstone and Clinton is four acres of vacant buildings and weeds.

Rich Development, also based in Southern California and also a strong player on the local retail scene, had a vision for the site.

Smart & Final would move into a 28,000-square-foot building and serve as the anchor tenant. That was pivotal to getting the project off the ground.

Several smaller retail buildings, one slated to be a restaurant, would complete the project.

Three of the corners at Blackstone and Clinton already look good. The Smart & Final project would make it four-for-four.

Then the City Council in the course of events approved Mayor Ashley Swearengin’s 2035 general plan after years of public debate. This added a complication.

The new general plan puts a premium on the revitalization of older neighborhoods. A key part of this tall order is creating commercial corridors that are more inviting to people. This means different things to different people, but restoring a degree of beauty and modernism in the urban landscape is deemed critical.

Blackstone between downtown and River Park is perhaps the plan’s most important corridor. The avenue for the most part has the look and feel of the car-centered culture of a half-century ago. The general plan and the proposed development code (soon to come to the City Council) aim to change that.

This is the context for the Swearengin administration asking that two buildings in the Smart & Final project to be located along the Blackstone sidewalk. The Smart & Final/Rich Development team wanted one (the restaurant). Everyone agreed that putting the Smart & Final store deeper into the site was fine.

The reasons for this two-on-Blackstone vs. one-on-Blackstone led to arcane explorations into urban-planning principles and consumer-spending habits. It's sufficient to note that both sides dug in their heels. At the same time, each side realized there was no value in forcing the other side into abject surrender.

Events of the past two months pointed to a mutual desire to de-escalate the tensions.

There once was considerable chatter in some City Hall circles that Swearingin's hopes for the Blackstone/Clinton corner were doomed. The thinking was that the project would work its way through the Planning Commission to the City Council. Four council votes would be enough to give Smart & Final exactly what it wanted. Such a decision would not be subject to Swearingin's veto.

The chatter was that this scenario had the four votes. In theory, Smart & Final and Olivier merely had to stay the course.

But as administration officials made clear along the way, such a scenario would deal a high-profile blow to a new general plan that, while not unanimously embraced by Fresnoans, certainly has broad support in the city. The brand names of both the general plan and Smart & Final were on the line.

The project went to the Planning Commission in mid-March, but commissioners agreed (at the developer's request) to postpone the debate for several weeks. Those weeks came and went without the issue returning to the agenda. Then Smart & Final's Bernardini said the company will look elsewhere in Fresno.

Rudd said he's confident the future will hold two ribbon-cuttings. Someone else will see what Smart & Final saw, and develop that corner of Blackstone/Clinton. And Smart & Final, already enthused about the money-making possibilities of central Fresno, will find a site that works for all concerned.

Of the recent tempest, Rudd said: "I'm still trying to figure out what the problem is."

Olivier and a city crew spent part of Tuesday removing trash and weeds at the Blackstone/Clinton site.

"We should be under construction right now, not out here picking up leaves because we feel bad," Olivier said. "The next time this happens, the city of Fresno needs to step up and support established neighborhoods by greenlighting projects that clear away blight."

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