

City Hall officials: Full speed ahead on Fulton Corridor project

By George
Hostetter

The Fulton Mall from the top of the Pacific Southwest Building; Chukchansi Park is in the upper right.

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- *Fresno City Hall officials say work could soon begin on the Fulton Corridor project.*
- *Mall supporters say they're still fighting to save the six-block-long pedestrian walkway.*
- *Fulton Corridor's fate could be an issue in the 2016 mayor's race.*

Fulton is a corridor on the move — though it's pulled in opposite directions.

Fresno City Hall officials say work will soon begin on turning the six blocks of Fulton Mall into a two-way street friendly to cars, pedestrians and economic bonanzas.

A general contractor to oversee the \$20 million project should be selected by late summer. The first chunks of mall concrete could be flying by the fall.

But supporters of the 50-year-old mall are pushing a different dynamic. They say the millions would be better spent on refurbishing what has turned into a nationally renowned pedestrian walkway.

A group of activists has taken matters to court, where it lost the first round but vows to keeping fighting.

Fulton, long viewed as Fresno's "main street," still gets the political blood boiling.

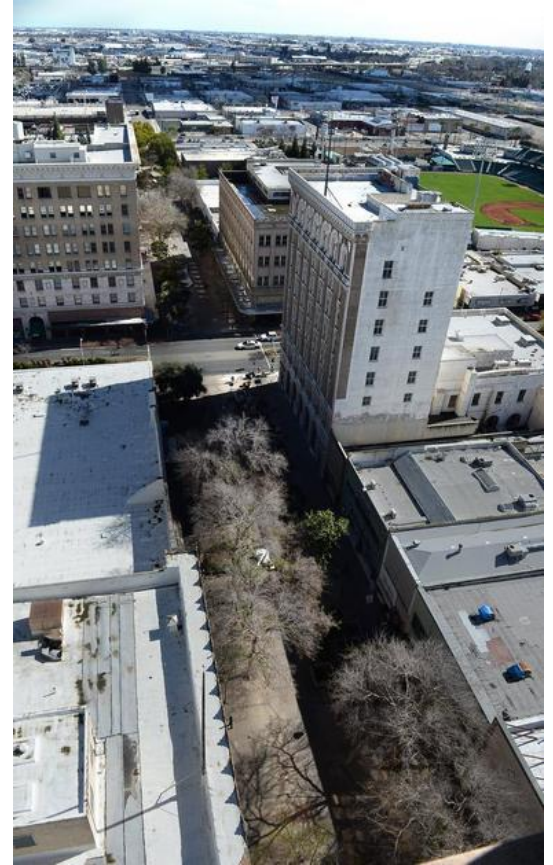
The administration of Mayor Ashley Swearingin makes a simple point. Fresno gave the mall a good-faith effort. Take a look at the place — things obviously didn't work. A prudent return of vehicular traffic will spur business growth and social energy.

"It's coming," says Deputy City Manager Wilma Quan-Schecter of the rebirth of Fulton Street.

Doug Richert says anyone who loves economic growth would jump at the chance to preserve the mall.

"Fulton Mall is unique," says Richert, co-chairman of Downtown Fresno Coalition, the group suing to stop the mall's destruction. "It's a historical and cultural asset for the city, and can be economically viable. With renovation and refurbishing, the mall can be a draw for downtown."

A lot of ink has been spilled over the past 60 years on the fate of Fresno's central business district, Fulton between Inyo and Tuolumne streets being the area's heart.



It's far from certain whether any more of relevance remains to be said. Perhaps Fresno should simply prepare for the day in 2016 or early 2017 when civic leaders turn Fulton Mall's ceremonial opening of Sept. 1, 1964 on its head by cutting the ribbon that welcomes back the car.

Or perhaps the legal system will have other ideas.

Until then, here's a review of where things stand with what some call Fulton Mall and others call Fulton Corridor.

Then: Taking the gamble

Fulton Mall's genesis is a familiar story to many.

City leaders in the mid-1950s caught the urban-renewal wave sweeping the nation. The suburbs and their shopping centers were here to stay, but City Hall figured there was a way to transform into a worthy competitor a downtown that hadn't received much care during the Great Depression and World War II.

The result over the course of a decade was the Fresno Plan, of which Fulton Mall was only one piece. The Fresno Plan was in significant part the work of urban architect Victor Gruen and his firm.

Several points during this journey from initial inspiration to Sept. 1, 1964 provide context to what would become Fulton Mall.

- There had to be a villain to downtown's problems. That villain, Gruen told a Fresno audience in May 1959, was the car.

"If we do not act decisively in our generation, the advantages of urban culture may disappear," Gruen said. "The mechanical being has found its natural habitat in the freeway, closed to pedestrians. The human being should likewise demand his own habitat without mechanical smells and sounds."

The answer, Gruen said, was "pedestrian islands," places where people could walk and shop without dodging cars. Such islands, Gruen said, would separate "flesh from the machine in urban cells revolving around the downtown core."

- The Fresno Plan called for the closing of a key portion of Broadway (the street west of Fulton), home to dozens of businesses. Business-owners protested. The Gruen team in the face of this pushback hit hard on the crisis theme.

Frank Hotchkiss, the Fulton Mall project manager, told Redevelopment Agency officials in 1960 that "you can decide whether (downtown) will be the future center of the third-largest metropolitan area in California or one disorganized segment of a formless sprawl across the San Joaquin Valley. We believe the time is now and this opportunity will not wait long."

- The pool of skeptics only grew. They said the Fresno Plan's ideas were untested on such a large scale. Hotchkiss said that was a feature of the plan, not a bug.

"Yes," Hotchkiss told merchants in 1961, "it is experimental to the extent that all new development is experimental — in fact, to the degree that life itself is experimental."

- Life elsewhere in the Fresno metropolitan area moved on as City Hall officials wrestled with the Fresno Plan.

The Bee in August 1964 reported that Clovis, still a small town far to the northeast, had nearly 170 acres along Shaw Avenue zoned for commercial development. That was said to be enough land to handle the retail needs of more than 200,000 people.

- And in mid-August 1964, The Bee reported that Fresno's six-week-old parking garage at Fulton and Merced streets, deemed an important element to the mall's future, had never had more than 17 cars at any one time. The garage had

room for 215 cars.

• Fulton Mall opened some two weeks later. An estimated 25,000 people, the largest crowd to that time ever to gather in downtown, heard Gov. Edmund G. “Pat” Brown praise the city for its bold answer to urban decay.

“Above and beyond what this pioneering effort means to Fresno,” Brown said, “it stands as evidence to the entire nation that one of our greatest problems can be successfully met and solved.”

Now: Moving forward with confidence ...

The Swearingin team sees no troubles ahead. Cars along Fulton Corridor are inevitable.

Deputy City Manager Quan-Schechter says there’s \$15.6 million from a federal grant and another \$2 million or so from Measure C, the Fresno County transportation sales tax, to pay for everything. More money is coming from public and private sources, she says.

When the administration goes to the City Council with a proposed contract for the general contractor, Quan-Schechter says, “we will have all the funds identified.”

The administration is not worried about legal challenges.

“We are completely confident in our arguments,” Quan-Schechter says.

Construction should take 12 to 18 months.

Two-way traffic will return to what are now Fulton, Merced, Mariposa and Kern malls. On-street parking spaces will be created. Most of the mall architecture — sculptures, benches, fountains — will be retained in the area. The corridor will have more trees than today. Much of the right-of-way will be reserved for pedestrians.

The project “is going to be fantastic for our downtown,” Quan-Schechter says.

... but still facing critics

Every crusade needs a crisis, and the Downtown Fresno Coalition’s quest is no different.

Co-chairman Richert says the group is as diverse as Fresno itself. Some members have long taken an interest in the mall’s artistic treasures. Others are business owners focused on the mall’s money-making opportunities. Still others see the mall as history come alive, its buildings and location whispering of yesterday’s glories.

Swearingin’s policies concentrated everyone’s minds.

“Once the mayor started talking about re-introducing traffic to Fulton, the coalition kicked into high gear,” Richert says.

A tipping point came in February 2014 when the City Council in a 5-2 vote said it was time to bring traffic back to Fulton Corridor. Council Member Paul Caprioglio voted no, saying he worried about cost overruns. Council Member Sal Quintero voted no, saying there are less drastic alternatives.

The coalition sued in Superior Court, saying City Hall made such a mess of a state-mandated environmental report that the entire issue should return to square one. Superior Court Judge Dennis Peterson in October rejected the coalition’s claims.

The coalition has appealed.

The coalition also has a similar lawsuit on the federally mandated environmental report.

Meanwhile, the coalition continues to try to win in the court of public opinion. Richert describes a strategy that builds

on the Caprioglio-Quintero concerns.

Among Richert's points:

- The mall's complexity — expensive artwork, aging infrastructure, six blocks long — makes cost overruns almost inevitable. "The council is the financial watchdog on this," Richert says.
- If the bills soar past \$20 million, the trims will be politically hard. "You have to have asphalt if you're building a street," Richert says. "That means the artwork would probably have to go."
- The mall is more flexible than the mayor suggests. "It helps to look at Fulton Mall as a piece of artwork itself," Richert says. "It wasn't designed to stay static, but to have more artwork added to reflect the changing times."
- It would take millions to refresh the mall, but the money wouldn't have to be spent at once. "The cracks need to be fixed," Richert says. "The fountains need help. You need to get rid of the dead trees. You would plant new trees. You could spend in phases."

None of this is new. None of it worked in the council chamber.

Richert doesn't care.

"The project was rushed," Richert says. "I hope the City Council will take another hard look at it."

Then and now: The context has changed ...

The idea in the early 1960s was that Fulton Mall with a thriving retail sector and a vibrant cultural scene would be downtown's dynamo. The energy would radiate in all directions, reviving all it touched.

Probably no one in those days could have guessed that just the opposite would occur.

Downtown, especially in the last 20 years, has changed dramatically. Much of the change has been policy-driven. For example, city and state officials partnered to put government offices in downtown whenever practicable.

The private sector got involved. Club One Casino, for instance, turned a former bank site on Van Ness Avenue into a hot spot of entertainment.

The examples go on and on.

Granville Homes recently opened Brio on Broadway, another of the company's trendy apartment projects in the Cultural Arts District. There's a new federal courthouse near a City Hall building that didn't exist 25 years ago. Kern Street between Van Ness and N Street is full of relatively new or rehabilitated buildings. A Bus Rapid Transit station is coming to Courthouse Park and the city will soon build a street-level crosswalk from the park to the west side of Van Ness, a blessing to anyone who shudders at using the poorly lit underground walkway.

In other words, the rest of downtown seems to be the dynamo while Fulton Mall stagnates.

Which raises an unexpected question: Did Fresno in 1964 have it backwards, and it's only now, when much of the rest of downtown has its act together, that the mall is ready to take off?

Yes, says the Downtown Fresno Coalition's Richert.

"A place like Fulton Mall that is dedicated to pedestrians will be a place that people want to live next to," Richert says.

No, says Deputy City Manager Quan-Schechter.

Fulton "is our original main street," Quan-Schechter says. "It's the densest part of our city. It's key that traffic be re-

introduced and that it be a better pedestrian experience. That's what our Fulton Mall reconstruction project is going to do."

... One thing's certain: There is no sure thing

"Fresno is a city on the move," The Bee stated in a 96-page special section published Aug. 30, 1964.

The theme was Fresno as a "city of tomorrow," but much of the section was devoted to the promise of a Fulton Mall slated to officially open two days later.

Some things never change. Swearingin for more than six years as mayor has touted Fresno as a city with a bright future and Fulton as a corridor with immense untapped promise.

But Swearingin has only 20 months left in her second and final term. There's a good chance she'll be out of office when cars return to this portion of Fulton. She'll definitely be out of office when City Hall must craft policies to take advantage of any changes.

Fulton is shaping up as a key issue in the 2016 mayor's race.

There's a precedent. The backdrop for the 2000 mayoral runoff between Alan Autry and Dan Whitehurst was a \$40 million baseball stadium near the mall's south end. The City Council (over the opposition of termed-out Mayor Jim Patterson) had already approved its construction when voters went to the polls. The campaign question was how to fully exploit the revitalizing potential of this dramatic change to downtown's landscape.

Autry won, but the stadium (as yet) never fulfilled its lofty press clippings.

The names of nearly a dozen people have been pitched as possible mayoral candidates in 2016. Council Member Lee Brand so far is the only declared candidate.

Brand says he's fine-tuning his ideas for the post-Fulton Mall era. He says the six-block stretch may need a master-developer. He says a Fulton Corridor with cars eventually will be a success.

"But," Brand admits, "virtually nothing in life is 100% guaranteed to work."

Contact George Hostetter: ghostetter@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6272 or [@GeorgeHostetter](https://twitter.com/GeorgeHostetter) on Twitter.