

Manchester Center: Jerry Dyer proposal could lead to big changes



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A small army of Fresno's finest cops apparently is coming to Manchester Center -- for a long stay, if the City Council says so.

Chief Jerry Dyer wants the central Fresno shopping center to be the home base for his Violent Crime Impact Team (VCIT). He will ask the council on Thursday to give him the green light to conclude a lease with the center's owner, Omninet Properties.

Here, according to the Chief's report, are key details:

- * VCIT headquarters will be in a space of 5,000 to 8,000 square feet.
- * The five-year lease is for free. Omninet will pay for tenant improvements. The city will pay operating costs, expected to be no more than \$3,440 per month. The money is expected to come from development impact fees.
- * VCIT consists of one commander, six supervisors and 36 uniformed officers. They are divided into six teams.
- * At least 20 officers will be stationed at Manchester Center.
- * The six teams are currently housed at the Police Department's four district stations. This is due to past budget woes. A central VCIT headquarters is deemed wise policy.

What's at play here is nothing less than Mayor Ashley Swearingin's "Restore Fresno" initiative.

Manchester Center on the northeast corner of Blackstone and Shields avenues perhaps best captures the nature of post-World War II Fresno growth.

City leaders in the late 1940s and early 1950s knew full well the potential to the north. Fresno State College officials at that time were building a new campus at Cedar and Shaw avenues. Mr. and Mrs. A.L. Funch were gearing up to build what would become Fig Garden Village at Shaw and Palm Avenue. Carl Pilegard, looking to complement his downtown Jensen & Pilegard feed store, was expanding to Blackstone near Shields.

But Fresno didn't have a worthy suburban rival to the downtown business district until Manchester Center came along.

In the beginning it was called Manchester Business Center. The groundbreaking for the first building, the 32,000-square-foot Mayfair Market, was on May 15, 1953. Fresno's population in 1953 was approaching 100,000.

The Bee on Nov. 5, 1953 wrote: "The Manchester Business Center and adjacent Manchester Park 120 acre subdivision at Blackstone and Shields Avenues have mushroomed into a thriving community in less than a year with 375 new homes occupied by more than 1,000 persons."

The drive from Manchester Center to City Hall (now Police Department headquarters) was less than three miles, a mere hop-skip-and-jump these days. But Shields/Blackstone in 1953 was the north edge of Fresno. Manchester Center in popular history started the land rush in that direction.

The Bee by September 1955 was calling it the “multimillion dollar Manchester Shopping Center.” The formal opening was on Oct. 1, 1955.

The businesses included Mayfair Market, Longs Drug Store, Mode O’Day, Gallenkamp Shoes, Trend O’ Fashion, F.W. Woolworth, Strauss’, Kirks, Cover Girl, Freeman’s Shoe Company, Weill Brothers and the Youngsters Department Store. Sears-Roebuck was slated to open its store within months.

“These are only a fraction of the stores which will occupy the 40 acre tract when the center is completed in 1957,” Charles A. Bergfeld, Manchester Shopping Center president, told The Bee before the formal opening.

The place at full build-out was expected to have 2,200 employees and 4,200 parking spaces.

Manchester Center was a huge hit with consumers and business-owners. Things went so well in the early years that community leaders in June 1959 unveiled a new brick, steel and glass station near Sears to make it more pleasant for customers waiting for a city bus. The \$3,600 facility was funded not by City Hall but by the Manchester Merchants Council.

Downtown merchants responded in two ways.

First, they joined forces with City Hall in the mid-1950s to energize a downtown still feeling the effects of Great Depression despair and World War II sacrifice. The birth of the Redevelopment Agency was the start. The opening of Fulton Mall on Sept. 1, 1964 was the high point.

Second, many downtown merchants, like smart capitalists, hedged their bets.

For instance, officials with Roos/Atkins department stores announced in April 1960 that they had signed a 20-year lease for a second Fresno store, this one in Manchester Center. The company also had a four-story store in downtown at Fulton and Fresno streets.

Roos/Atkins President Edward H. Gauer told The Bee in 1960 that the company’s experience with several stores in one city “has been very successful, particularly so when a shopping center unit is anchored to a well developed downtown store. It gives us strength, greater advertising power and lower overhead.”

Life moved fast at Manchester Center.

The center was sold in June 1966 to Fred J. Russell of Los Angeles. Gottschalks in October 1978 decided to build a store at the center. The center in 1980 completed an expansion that saw its floor space increase by nearly 40%. Everything was enclosed, turning the center into a mall.

But capitalism is all about “creative destruction,” as economist Joseph Schumpeter said. This was true for Manchester Center.

For example, Roos/Atkins cut the ribbon on its Manchester Center store on Nov. 15, 1961. The company closed its downtown store on Jan. 11, 1974, ending nearly 60 years of business in that area. The parent company of Roos/Atkins fell on hard times in 1980-1981, forcing the company to close its Manchester Center store. Berkeley’s, an upscale woman’s clothing store with a long downtown history under various corporate guises, announced in December 1981 that it was leaving Fulton Mall to take over the former Roos/Atkins site at Manchester Center. Berkeley’s in December 1985 closed its Manchester Center store. Company officials said their customers had moved too far north.

Life in the 1970s and 1980s moved fast in the rest of metropolitan Fresno, as well.

Fashion Fair shopping center at Shaw and First Street opened in 1970. Clovis went from farm burg to high-ticket destination. Fig Garden Village blossomed. Ed Kashian and others laid the foundation for the River Park shopping centers at the north end of Blackstone. One store after another -- Gottschalks, J.C. Penney, Woolworth's among them -- closed on Fulton Mall.

Manchester Center by the mid-1990s was struggling every bit as much as downtown. Russell, the mall's owner for nearly 30 years, filed for bankruptcy in 1995. He lost the property to a financial company the following year.

Manchester Center over the next decade tried a "mixed-use" strategy. Caltrans moved into a former retail site. A call center set up shop. Signature Theatres opened a 16-screen operation on the center's east side (now Regal Cinemas).

Still, the center struggled. Efforts to adapt seemed to result in a mission that grew increasingly confused.

City officials all this time watched events unfold at Manchester Center. At first they worried. Then they got scared.

Crime, of course, was a key factor.

Long-time Fresnans from every walk of life took a lot of heat from smug idealists in the last third of the 20th century for their desire to move to the safest neighborhoods they could afford. This common-sense desire generally sent them north. Fresno, like a lot of California cities, never recovered its innocence after the August 1965 Watts riots. It would take the 9-11 terrorist attacks of 2001 for The Bee to devote more coverage to a crisis than it did for Watts in 1965.

The rise of gangs in Fresno is a familiar story. You don't need to be an old-timer to remember the mid-1990s when the city suffered through nearly 100 homicides a year.

It's sufficient here to note that crime around Manchester Center grew over the years. This manifested itself in many ways.

For example, City Hall officials about five years ago wanted to let everyone know that they would crack down on criminal behavior on Fresno Area Express buses. As many as 15 FAX drivers were being assaulted per year.

Where did city officials gather to make this public announcement? At the big FAX station on the west side of Manchester Center.

Crime around Manchester Center seems to be getting worse. Just last month, 29-year-old Gregory Gibson III was sentenced to two years in prison after pleading no contest to a felony charge of inflicting injury on an elderly person.

The 6-foot 1-inch, 220-pound Gibson in December 2014 had pushed 62-year-old John Raymond Medina to the ground at the Manchester Center bus station. Medina sustained injuries when he hit his head. The crime was captured by a bystander's cell phone.

There are other red flags.

Police point to a neighborhood to the north of Manchester Center as a hotbed of crime activity.

The Bee's Hannah Furfaro reported on Feb. 19 about the violence at and around Fort Miller Middle School, just a short walk to the west of Manchester Center, and agony this causes for children, parents and educators.

Council Member Clint Olivier, who represents the Manchester Center area, has fought for years to shutter illegal massage parlors in his district. He and police say they thrive on human trafficking.

Crime, though, is only a tactical problem for City Hall. The strategic challenge is what a complete collapse of the

Blackstone/Shields intersection would do to Mayor Swarengin's "Restore Fresno" initiative.

Get a good-sized map of Fresno. Put your finger on the spot that is the intersection of Blackstone and Shields. If you were Napoleon, that's the ground you'd want to control. Downtown isn't the key to the revitalization of inner-city Fresno. In a lot of ways, downtown is already a smashing success. Do something nifty with Fulton Corridor, and everything else is a mopping-up operation. But Blackstone/Shields -- now there's your tipping point.

Take Bus Rapid Transit, for example. The \$40 million project with its superior bus service will begin its route in north Fresno near River Park. BRT will head south to Courthouse Park, jog a bit through downtown, then head into southeast Fresno via Ventura Avenue/Kings Canyon Road.

BRT might as well stay on the drawing board if Blackstone/Shields becomes No-Man's Land.

Take Swarengin's Neighborhood Revitalization hopes. Neighborhood by neighborhood, one at a time, is her game plan.

Grab a good compass, put the anchor point on a map at Blackstone/Shields, then draw a circle with a two-mile radius. Fix the neighborhoods in that circle and Fresno is forever a different town. The transformative power of the Lowell-Yokomi-Jefferson arc near downtown pales in comparison.

"Restore Fresno," of course, is the key policy of Swarengin's final 20 months in office. She and top city officials held a news conference this past week at Yokomi Elementary School to officially kick-off the campaign. The initiative is a complex piece of technocratic machinery, to say the least. It's aim (although Swarengin didn't use these words) is to restore to Fresno's older neighborhoods all the hope and promise and excitement and growth and wealth and liberty that Manchester Center in May 1953 symbolized.

But how? The time for talk is over. The Mayor's gotta act.

So, we circle back to Chief Dyer's proposed lease at Manchester Center.

The Violent Crime Impact Team has been around in one form or another for ten years.

In June 2005, just as VCIT was warming up its muscle with the help of other law enforcement agencies, Dyer told The Bee that Fresno in the previous 24 days had seen 30 shootings with 25 victims and five people killed.

"Anytime I see spikes in crime, I get very, very worried," Dyer said. VCIT "is the next step in further eradicating gang members from our community."

According to Bee reports over the past decade, VCIT has evolved from a multi-agency effort into one that is strictly a Fresno Police Department affair. But VCIT's focus on gangs and the most violent of crimes appears unchanged.

For example, it was officers from VCIT earlier this month who caught William Gideons near Floradora Avenue and Thesta Street after Gideons had allegedly stabbed to death Dennis Horstmeier. The Floradora-Thesta intersection is short walk south of Manchester Center. Dyer in his report to the City Council says money woes from the Great Recession kept the Violent Crime Impact Team from finding a home of its own. The economy is rebounding.

"Housing the VCIT unit at (Manchester Center) is part of a concerted effort to revitalize the Blackstone Corridor and the surrounding neighborhoods, which will greatly increase the police presence and positively impact public safety," Dyer wrote.

Dyer in a Sunday email to The Bee said Swarengin and City Manager Bruce Rudd had asked him to find a way to put more policing heft in the Blackstone/Shields area.

Putting VCIT in Manchester Center will be a "win win for the PD, the City of Fresno, FAX, Manchester Center and the

surrounding neighborhoods,” Dyer wrote.

Two points in conclusion.

First, Bee real estate reporter BoNhia Lee reported Friday that big changes are coming to Manchester Center. These include a new mall entrance, a two-story food court, an exterior shopping area and an events plaza. The City Council last week also agreed to vacate a right-turn lane from Shields to Blackstone to further the center’s renovation plans.

Second, District 7 Council Member Olivier is happy.

“For a very long time, the stretch of Blackstone south of Shaw to downtown has been left behind,” Olivier told me Friday. “Suddenly, Blackstone is a very hot topic. The administration is putting resources into Blackstone. I applaud that.”

At the same time, no one ever said the world of politics is fair. It wasn’t that way in the 1950s when Fresno sprinted to the north. It’s not that way now.

I make this obvious statement because, should the Manchester Center lease become a big deal on Thursday, it probably will be Swearingin who gets most of the credit. That’s the way it is with Fresno’s strong-mayor government. The chief executive has all the power to turn policy wishes into reality.

Yet, it was Olivier among City Hall officials who has most consistently trumpeted the need for more public safety at Manchester Center. It seemed much of the time he was speaking to an empty (or indifferent) City Hall.

“For years it has been my goal to return the city’s attention to District 7 and Blackstone,” Olivier said. “I feel that is starting to happen. I am very proud.”