

## Fulton Mall project to shift into gear next month

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Aaron Blair, president and CEO of Downtown Fresno Partnership, poses on the Fulton Mall with Pierre-Auguste Renoir's "Washer Woman." All of the mall's public art will be temporarily removed as part of the ambitious project to convert Fulton Street back to a two-way artery. Downtown's six-block-long Fulton Mall is poised to undergo a dramatic facelift.

After years of discussion, debate and delays — and amid still-pending lawsuits — city officials are poised to begin the Fulton Street Reconstruction Project, an ambitious plan to reopen the 50-year-old pedestrian mall to two-way auto traffic.

Even though the project still faces state and federal lawsuits tied to claims it will have a negative environmental impact, Randall Morrison, Fresno's deputy city engineer, said last week the project is "on schedule."

"Requests for bids [from general contractors] will go out next month," Morrison said.

The city council, which approved the conversion project in February 2014 on a 5-2 vote, is expected to award a contract by the middle of September.

"Typically, work starts three to four weeks after the council award. So actual construction should start in October or November," Morrison said.

The \$20 million project — funded in large part by a \$16 million federal TIGER (Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery) grant — will take "about one year" to complete, Morrison said.

So by early 2017, cars could once again be zooming up and down Fulton between Tuolumne and Inyo streets.

“Unforeseen issues can always cause delays, but right now we’re on schedule and within budget on our estimates,” Morrison added.

Converting the pedestrian mall back into a two-way street is “not the expensive part” of the project, according to Morrison.

“Just to turn the five blocks back into a road would only cost a couple of million,” he said.

“The higher costs come in all of the decorative concrete work, fountains and artwork restoration involved in the project,” he said. “There’s just a lot of detail to it.”

While state and federal lawsuits currently on appeal accuse the City of Fresno of underplaying the negative environmental impact the conversion will have, city officials said this week that there were currently no injunctions preventing the project from starting.

Meanwhile, supporters of downtown revitalization say the project will be the catalyst to reinvigorate the city’s long-blighted core.

In the 1960s and 1970s, pedestrian-mall conversions were a civic fad. Roughly 200 U.S. cities, experimented with the idea, closing off at least part of their downtown to auto traffic.

But according to research published in 2008 by the Downtown Memphis Commission, some 85 percent of the pedestrian malls once in existence in America’s downtowns have been partially or fully reopened to traffic.

“The pedestrian mall might have seemed like a good idea 50 years ago, but today, it doesn’t make much sense,” said Aaron Blair, president and CEO of Downtown Fresno Partnership.

For the next 18 months, Blair said he and his staff will be “very busy focusing on economic development issues” related to the conversion project.

“We’ll be concentrating on getting the message out that Fulton Street businesses are still open during construction,” Blair said this week. “And we’ll also be focusing on new business recruitment and enhancement” of existing businesses.

“When the street reopens, we want to make sure it looks like a fresh, exciting place,” Blair said, “both for existing businesses and for new businesses.”

After Fulton Street reopens to two-way traffic, nearly 200 new parking spaces will be available downtown, with parallel street parking in both directions on Fulton.

Many of the Fulton Mall’s big shade trees will be preserved and during construction additional large trees will be planted to help keep the sidewalk and storefront areas shady and cool.

The conversion design also calls for the sidewalk area on the east side of the street to be considerably wider —28 feet— than the sidewalk on the west side, which will be 14-feet wide.

Retractable “bollards” — large posts that help control traffic — will be installed at 12 locations along Fulton and will make it easy to close the street for special events.

The Downtown Fresno Partnership is already in the process of working with the artists — or their representatives — whose artwork is displayed up and down the mall.

Plans call for the 28 sculptures, fountains and mosaic benches now decorating the mall to be temporarily removed

during construction.

In most cases, Blair said, representatives of the artists will remove the artwork and perform necessary restoration before the pieces are reinstalled when the conversion is complete.

“Many of the pieces will only be moving a few feet from their current location,” Blair said.

After being reinstalled, more information will be displayed describing the various pieces and the backgrounds of the artists who created them.

“Most people in Fresno have no idea that we have the only Renoir in the world that people can walk right up to and touch,” Blair said of the sculpture by the renowned French artist Pierre-Auguste Renoir, which is displayed unobtrusively just a few feet from the entrance to Payless Shoes at Mariposa and Fulton streets.

The sculpture was completed in 1917 and is titled La Grande Laveuse — or “The Washer Woman.”

The Fulton Mall features sculptures from a dozen other prominent artists including Clement Renzi, Francois Stahly, Claire Falkenstein and Gordon Newell.

Local art expert Linda Cano of AXIS Art Consulting is helping oversee the removal, restoration and reinstallation of the mall’s artwork.

She declined to put a value on the collection but called it “one of the finest public art collections in the country.”

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