

# Swearingin wants money for key traffic signals in city's core

By George Hostetter  
ghostetter@fresnobee.com

Urban architect Victor Gruen had it all wrong. The key to getting rid of cars in downtown Fresno isn't Fulton Mall. It's traffic lights.

In other words, don't ban motorists. Enrage them.

This strikes me as the theme when the City Council on Thursday tackles an infrastructure idea from Mayor Ashley Swearingin.

It's a modest proposal. The Public Works Department wants the OK to apply for about \$2.2 million in grants from the Fresno Council of Governments. The money would go to a handful of traffic signal or sidewalk projects.

Three caught my eye:

- Traffic signals at Tulare and L streets, on the south side of Courthouse Park.
- Traffic signals at Fresno and L streets, on the park's north side.
- Traffic signals at Divisadero and Mariposa streets, on the border between downtown and the Jefferson Elementary School neighborhood.

All three spots lie within the triangle that pretty much defines downtown: Highway 99, Union Pacific railroad tracks and Divisadero.

I thought: This small area is already loaded with traffic lights and stop signs. What's going on?

It's soon going to be easier to get to downtown. It also will be more enjoyable to walk around downtown.

Assistant City Manager Renena Smith

I met with Public Works officials Robert Andersen and Randy Bell. They said the COG money would come from the state's Active Transportation Program, a pot of funds designed to encourage people to get out of their cars and engage in "active modes of transportation." That's walking and bicycling.

Walkers in particular are encouraged by traffic lights in tightly-packed urban areas. Take it from someone dubbed by Bee Executive Editor Jim Boren as "the walking journalist" — crossing the street in downtown can be risky business.

The Tulare/L intersection gets a lot of walkers moving between the county Hall of Records and retailers on Kern Street. The Fresno/L intersection, in the middle of the jail-Sheriff's Office axis, also gets plenty of foot traffic.

At both spots, you inch your way off the sidewalk and pray oncoming motorists are in a yield-the-right-of-way mood. Sheriff's deputies do the head-swivel routine just like the rest of us.

Pedestrians at M Street on the park's east side don't face this problem as they go from Courthouse Park to Mariposa Mall's police headquarters or the county library.

## Proposed traffic signals

- A. Divisadero and Mariposa streets**
- B. Fresno and L streets**
- C. Tulare and L streets**



The Fresno Bee

The traffic lights at Mariposa and Divisadero have a different goal — kids' safety.

This is a stunningly complex piece of urban geography. There's the huge Community Regional Medical Center at Divisadero and Fresno. Starbucks and Office Depot are in a small shopping center at Divisadero and Tulare. Divisadero transitions into Tulare, but it's not a straight line. Highway 41 has on-off ramps galore. Downtown beckons beyond the Starbucks. Southeast Fresno unfolds east of 41.

And tucked into a corner of the Jefferson neighborhood on the north side of Divisadero is an elementary school.

Lots of boys and girls each school day cross Divisadero at the corner of the Office Depot site, heading to Jefferson. They take the same route home. This path means they must negotiate the area where southbound 41's off-ramp meets Divisadero.

Ever been in this area at 8 or 8:30 on a weekday morning? The massive gridlock turns Gruen, who convinced Fresno to build Fulton Mall more than 50 years ago by claiming cars have "loosened the urban fabric," into a prophet.

It's just as bad in the late afternoon.

The Mariposa/Divisadero traffic signals are designed to save lives by moving the youngsters' crossing path away from the worst of the chaos.

Andersen and Bell said the COG applications are competitive, so there's no guarantee Fresno will get the money. If the city does, the stop lights could be in place by 2017.

More changes are coming to Fresno's downtown street grid.

The transformation of the Fulton Corridor between Tuolumne and Inyo streets from pedestrian mall to busy street remains a Swearingin priority. This means more traffic lights.

I've been told that the Fulton Corridor project includes the return of vehicular traffic on Mariposa from Fulton to Van Ness Avenue. Pedestrians would be able to cross to Courthouse Park at street level. That means more traffic lights.

Courthouse Park at that point will be ringed by eight sets of traffic lights.

It took Bee reporter George Hostetter 40 minutes to walk from the corner of First and Tulare streets on the edge of downtown to the corner of G and Tulare in Chinatown during the afternoon rush hour. His journey was delayed by an effort (successful, at least temporarily) to keep a stray dog out of traffic.

Public Works also is preparing plans for traffic lights on Tulare at N Street. First 5 Fresno County's new Lighthouse for Children building is here.

When that day comes, Tulare from G Street in Chinatown to First Street on the east edge of downtown will be a nearly unbroken string of traffic lights, train tracks, train stations, bus stations and freeway on-off ramps.

Then there's high-speed rail. A bullet-train official tells me work on demolishing the Tuolumne Street bridge over the Union Pacific tracks should begin by year's end. The Tuolumne bridge now has two lanes of traffic heading into downtown. The Stanislaus bridge has two lanes of traffic heading out of downtown.

The plan is for the Tuolumne bridge to come down and the Stanislaus bridge to be turned into two-way traffic. Then a new Tuolumne bridge will be built for two-way traffic. When that's done, the Stanislaus bridge will be demolished but not rebuilt. All this time, Fulton Mall will be transitioning to Fulton Street.

Downtown is changing for the better. But who in their right mind would drive through downtown with all this stop-go traffic?

That could be what City Hall has in mind.

Fresno is a dynamic urban center, Assistant City Manager Renena Smith said, “and we’ll be more so as our general plan is implemented. There will be more vitality. And with that comes more walking.”

George Hostetter: [559-441-6272](tel:559-441-6272), [@GeorgeHostetter](https://www.instagram.com/GeorgeHostetter)