

New retailers on Blackstone Avenue reviving Fresno's core

By BoNhia Lee
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Fresno's Blackstone Avenue business corridor is bouncing back.

Recent opportunities for retailers to obtain large properties or build new is helping to draw local and large national businesses to one of Fresno's main streets between McKinley and Sierra avenues.

And new development has reached its limit at the tip of the busy thoroughfare, Fresno retail brokers say, prompting businesses to revisit the city's central core where prices are low, access is easy and visibility is high.

"It's kind of refreshing," said Steve Rontell, a retail broker at [Colliers International](#) in Fresno who has several listings on Blackstone. "I see the trend getting much better. We're getting good activity."

Two large buildings that have sat empty on Blackstone for five years or more now have new life. The Ramos family, of [Ramos Furniture](#), in June bought the old [Fresno Ag](#) building at Blackstone and Gettysburg avenues. The 68,000-square-foot building went dark when Fresno Ag moved out in 2008.

Walmart opened a supercenter in the former Mervyn's building at Blackstone and Ashlan avenues in January. The 107,000 square foot building had been empty since Mervyn's declared bankruptcy and closed all its stores six years ago.

What Walmart "really did was set the tone for turning things around in that corridor," said Rontell, who represented the landlord in the deal.

But the mega retailer also created competition. The nearby Save Mart at Blackstone and Clinton avenues closed and Von's pulled out of its spot at Blackstone and Holland. Not long after the closures, however, [Smart & Final](#) announced that it would move into the Save Mart spot and the Von's property is on the cusp of unveiling a new tenant.

Other businesses have played musical chairs over the years moving from one building to another or closing up shop because of a downsizing or retirement. The Carrows restaurant, north of Ashlan Avenue, has been closed for a while but is getting many inquiries from potential restaurant owners, Rontell said. And the Martin's Flowers building, south of Gettysburg, is on the market. The owners plan to retire.

What Blackstone offers is 360-degree demographic pool. The closer you get to Blackstone and Ashlan, you're at the geographical center because of the freeway system.

Steve Rontell, retail broker, Colliers International

The Blackstone and Ashlan area is the "geographical center" of Fresno, offering businesses a 360-degree demographic pool, Rontell said. "You can get away with one store in town (on Blackstone) and service the whole Fresno and Clovis area," he said.

The older buildings on Blackstone are eclectic, have visibility and a lot of signage that is no longer allowed, Rontell said. And there is flexible zoning allowing for different uses.

But selling and leasing buildings along Blackstone met some challenges over the last five years starting with the recession, followed by the stigma that anything "south of Shaw isn't good." Rontell said.

Large businesses also found it tough to head south because property size tends to be smaller and parking is an

issue, said Fresno retail broker Mark Saito, of Mark Saito Company.

“If there is land available, I think (more companies) would take it,” Saito said.

Saito represented the Ramos family in the purchase of the Fresno Ag building. The property and the new Walmart were the last large available lots on Blackstone, he said.

This is unique because of the building size and location and the warehouse space...we’re a mainstay. We want to be an anchor in the community. We believe in the community.

Joni Sarafian, director of marketing for Ramos Furniture

Ramos Furniture had been searching for a property to buy along the Blackstone corridor since 2004 when it first started operating in the central San Joaquin Valley, said Joni Sarafian, director of marketing. Proximity to the new Walmart was a plus and the opportunity to buy instead of lease was ideal. The furniture company leases space for all of its Valley stores: two in Fresno, one in Clovis and one in Madera.

The building will be remodeled into a Ramos Furniture store and warehouse with an anticipated opening by the end of the year. There are no plans to close any existing stores, Sarafian said.

“We want to participate in revitalizing that area,” Sarafian said. “That’s important to us and keeping our jobs local. That’s why we keep opening stores and growing territories. We want to take care of our community. It’s important for us to help clean up the area and help other businesses in that area.”

While the Blackstone corridor got a burst from Walmart this year, the energy started building slowly at the end of 2014 when O’Reilly Auto Parts built a new store at Blackstone and Floradora.

Then other businesses followed by remodeling, rebuilding or announcing that they were moving into a storefront on Blackstone. Some of the biggest deals this year include Krispy Kreme returning to Fresno with a new concept store that will be built in front of the Target at Blackstone and Bullard avenues.

Hobby Lobby will tear down and build a 55,000-square-foot store at the former Fashion Furniture Outlet store at Blackstone and Sierra avenues.

“If it’s a good location and they consider (the building to be an) obsolete design, they will tear it down and build a new one,” said Saito, the broker. Taco Bell does it and so does McDonald’s, he said.

Clint Olivier, the Fresno City Council Member whose district covers the area, is excited about the new energy sweeping across Blackstone.

“Hopefully these signs of life are evidence that we are coming back,” Olivier said. “I’m very encouraged.”

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Blackstone business timeline

- Taco Bell leveled its old store and built a new building at Blackstone and McKinley that opened in February 2014.
- O’Reilly Auto Parts started building a new store at Blackstone and McKinley at the end of 2014. It opened early this year.
- Dutch Bros. remodeled a hamburger shack at Blackstone and McKinley that opened in January.
- Walmart opened a supercenter in the former Mervyn’s at Blackstone and Ashlan.

- Highpoint Capital Group, a Southern California investor, bought and renovated Manchester Center North, a small retail center north of the mall, in February at Blackstone and Shields.
- Krispy Kreme plans to build a smaller version of its doughnut shop in front of the Target at Blackstone and Bullard by next year.
- Dickey's Barbecue Pit and Jersey Mike's Subs also plan to open near the Krispy Kreme in 2016.
- Hobby Lobby, a national craft, art and home decor retailer, announced plans to tear down the former Fashion Furniture outlet at Blackstone and Sierra and build a new store with a planned opening early next year.
- Ramos Furniture bought the old Fresno Ag building at Blackstone and Gettysburg in June.

Imagine Blackstone Street Festival

When: 5 to 8 p.m. Friday, Susan B. Anthony school parking lot, [1542 E. Webster Ave., Fresno](#)

What: Reimagine a better Blackstone Avenue. Give input on what you want to see. Event will include games, raffles, prizes, food and entertainment.

Information: [Better Blackstone Association](#), info@betterblackstone.com or call (559) 485-1416.