

Fresno mayor takes new approach to boosting Blackstone Avenue

By George Hostetter
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Mayor Ashley Swearengin is taking a new path to revive Blackstone Avenue, once seen as Fresno's "Boulevard of Dreams."

The result may go a long way toward defining the final 15 months of an administration with great faith in the power of planning.

Traffic moves along Blackstone Avenue just north of East Olive Avenue on Friday in Fresno. Eric Paul Zamora ezamora@fresnobee.com

Swearengin has hired Claudia Ruiz, formerly chief of staff for Councilman Clint Olivier, as an economic development coordinator serving in the mayor's office.

City Hall over the years has had more economic gurus than it can count. But Ruiz's mission is unique. She is charged with helping modernize just one of Fresno's many streets.



Then again, Blackstone – some 8 miles of wealth, blight, potential and memories running through the center of town – isn't just any old street.

"I am very familiar with the challenges of Blackstone Avenue," Ruiz said. "But I also know the opportunities. So, when I heard the mayor was looking for somebody to be the point person for this area, I jumped at the chance."

Making Blackstone a more vibrant corridor is part of the general plan.

Mayor Ashley Swearengin

Swearengin, who will term out in January 2017, returned from a working vacation in July with a long to-do list. At the top: Make recognizable progress on turning Blackstone into something different than it is today.

"It's the most unifying street in the entire city," Swearengin said. "It is truly the city's spine. And when you look at the neighborhoods on either side, you see hundreds of thousands of people living there.

"Having positive things happen on Blackstone improves property values, not just on Blackstone, but in the surrounding neighborhoods."

The mayor realized her staff and the team in City Manager Bruce Rudd's office already had full plates. Olivier's District 7 covers part or all of Blackstone from East Gettysburg Avenue to East Divisadero Street.

Convincing Ruiz to make the 50-foot move on City Hall's second floor was the logical step.

"She knows the Blackstone corridor inside and out and has a five-year track record of working with businesses and property owners in the area to address their issues and concerns," Swearengin said.

Time to network

Ruiz, 31, grew up in Earlimart in Tulare County. She recently earned a master's degree in public administration from Fresno State. Her annual salary is \$74,027.

In essence, Ruiz will be a one-stop shop. There's good reason for such a concept.

City Hall is notorious for its size (number of employees, distance from one department to another) and complexity (codes, rules, regulations, ordinances seem to multiply with abandon). That's the definition of red tape.

However, Swearingin wants new businesses along Blackstone. She wants existing businesses on Blackstone to grow. She wants apartment living on Blackstone. That's a revolution.

How to reduce the former while spurring the latter?

Yes, there's a lot of pressure on me. But there are a lot of good things going on right now. We'll see even more in the next few years.

Claudia Ruiz, Fresno's new economic development coordinator for Blackstone Avenue

"I am going to be the go-to person for all things Blackstone," Ruiz said. "Anyone with questions about real estate or city policy or process can come to me with their questions. They won't have to go from one department to another."

Ruiz, on the job for only a few weeks, is still getting settled in.

Step one, she said, "is getting to know everybody on a personal level. I know many already, but I want to know everyone. I want to find out about their vision for their property and for Blackstone."

Now there's a subject for a novel-length report.

Long history

Whether a newcomer or a native with deep family roots, just about everyone in Fresno comes to know Blackstone.

The street for much of its life doubled as Highway 41, taking Fresnoans to and from Madera County and the Sierra Nevada. The north end today starts at the pretzel that is 41, North Friant Road and the River Park center. Heading south, Blackstone is home to just about every type of business.

A consumer on Blackstone can grab a meal, kick the tires of a new or used car, buy a can of paint, learn to dance, find a better bathtub and shoot a game of eight ball. And that's before the spendthrift gets to historic Manchester Center at East Shields Avenue. The array of services ends only when Blackstone merges into East Stanislaus Street near Dickey Playground on the south end.

Blackstone has been this way (though not always on this scale) for decades. The street wasn't the 20th century's only trail from downtown to suburbia, but it once was the most dynamic.

Four things about this vast topic help clarify where City Hall policy on Blackstone is headed:

- Blackstone has shown a knack for reinventing itself. For example, the street in the years after World War II attracted businesses with a water theme. There was Blackstone Swim Park at 2525 Blackstone, and Wonderland Roller Rink at 5310 Blackstone also had a public pool. Lakeside Park at Bullard and Blackstone (formerly Blackstone Bowl of auto-racing fame) featured a public fishing pond originally stocked with 1 million bluegill. All gave way to the creative destruction of capitalism.
- The City Council in 1970 voted to develop 80 acres of the 200-acre-plus Woodward Park and bird sanctuary, between Blackstone and Friant Road next to the San Joaquin River. Fresno soon had a new regional park and more fuel for suburban growth to the north.

- Highway 41 through Fresno was reborn in the 1980s as a modern freeway running parallel to Blackstone. There are no stoplights on this piece of 41. There are lots of stoplights on Blackstone. Someone needs a specific reason these days to travel Blackstone.

- Swearingin took office in January 2009 promising to revive inner-city Fresno. She has moved fast and far. Not the least of that effort is the 2035 general plan that calls for Blackstone to be rejuvenated in many ways. Among them is more mixed-use development – housing and commercial in the same building. In other words, maybe the Blackstone of the 21st century, blessed with a new bus and rapid transit system, can offer more than stuff such as smog-test centers and fast-food restaurants.

Swearingin said: “We’re deregulating Blackstone to allow more types of projects.”

No consensus

Some at City Hall have a different view.

Getting rid of prostitution and getting rid of graffiti is not a generational process. We can do that in fairly short order. And we should.

Councilman Clint Olivier, whose district includes a big stretch of Blackstone

Olivier and Councilman Steve Brandau (whose District 2 border on the east side is Blackstone) say Swearingin should focus less on the the latest ideas of urban experts and more on the basics of municipal service.

“I hear a lot of talk about theory,” Olivier said. “But the reality is Blackstone can be a fantastic place if the city would only keep it clean.”

Olivier says Blackstone gets too many prostitutes, too many of the homeless, too much crime and graffiti.

“The mayor and I both want what is best for Blackstone,” Olivier said. “We just disagree on how to get there.”

Brandau fears City Hall, eager to impose its view of what’s right, will overdo it.

“Social engineering, centralized planning – they’re unproven philosophies,” Brandau said. “Too often, I’ve seen them backfire. I don’t want them to backfire in our community. I’m one to trust the free market.”

Swearingin has heard it all before. She faced similar criticism as the new general plan made its way to the council in December. The plan got approved.

She’s showing the same patience this time while promising to crack down on loitering and blight.

“Blackstone is primed,” the mayor said.

We want to make sure it works, whatever we decide. We want something that works for the neighbors, and that includes Fresno City College.

Granville Homes President Darius Assemi on a potential mixed-use project on Blackstone, near the college

Yet, 15 months isn’t much time. Swearingin needs a victory, something beyond assertion and plans, to show that Blackstone can be more than an unusually wide street full of mom-and-pop businesses.

There’s talk about a remodeled Manchester Center. Such talk has filled most of the past 20 years.

The Swearingin home run on Blackstone may come from Darius Assemi. The president of Granville Homes says he

might build a mixed-use project on the southwest corner of Blackstone and East Clinton avenues.

This is the same blighted corner that sparked the recent Swearingin-Olivier fight over a Smart & Final store.

Assemi says hurdles remain before he commits to build. But, he adds, he's on the same page as the mayor.

"We want to see the revival of the Blackstone corridor," Assemi said.

This is the Blackstone that is Ruiz's professional future.

She says she has a story to tell, to Blackstone stakeholders and the rest of Fresno.

When they hear it, Ruiz said, "they'll start believing."

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