

Bids come in high for Fulton Corridor project

By George Hostetter
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Construction bids for the Fulton Corridor project came in over budget by a hefty margin, dealing a blow to Mayor Ashley Swearingin's plans to return cars to the six-block stretch of downtown Fresno that is now a pedestrian mall.

Swearingin said the setback is temporary. Fulton Mall advocates said the high bids are yet more proof that the mayor's car-centered project is misguided.

City officials had hoped the low bid would be about \$20 million, the cost bandied about during long debate over the mall's fate.

American Paving, at \$23.05 million, had the lowest of the three bids opened Tuesday at City Hall. The others were Lewis C. Nelson at \$23.3 million and Granite Construction at \$27.68 million.

Swearingin said she is "a little disappointed" with the bids. She said it's time for city officials to "roll up our sleeves and sharpen our pencils." Thus fortified, the mayor said, the city no doubt can find a way to make the project work "with the resources we have."

Doug Richert, co-chairman of the Downtown Fresno Coalition, a group suing to stop the mall's destruction, said there are two problems with Swearingin's optimism.

We're within the range to where we can get the project built.

Mayor Ashley Swearingin

First, Richert said, it's far from certain that City Hall's secure resources are actually in the \$20 million range. He said several million dollars in state grants, viewed by city officials as a sure thing, may not be so solid.

The gap between American Paving's bid and City Hall's funding could actually be in the \$5 million to \$6 million range, Richert said.

Second, Richert said, he worries the city's pencil-wielding bean counters may shortchange the mall's art collection and water features in an effort to save money.

"The bids being high strengthens our questions about the project," Richert said. "We are greatly concerned the art will be shipped off some place and never be seen again. We believe there are options out there besides destroying the historic mall."

Swearingin said worries about the artwork are unfounded. She said the artwork and fountains will be restored. She said the public will get full benefit of their beauty.

"That is a major asset in downtown Fresno," Swearingin said.

The health of Fulton Mall became a heated public debate almost from the day after it was dedicated on Sept. 1, 1964. That argument only intensified after Swearingin took office in January 2009 and, a short time later, said inner-city Fresno would never fulfill its potential until something dramatic was done with the six blocks of Fulton between



Tuolumne and Inyo streets.

Everything came to a head in February 2014 when the City Council had to choose: Give the mall a major facelift or once again let motorists drive the span that was once Fresno's commercial center.

This is the perfect time to have a community discussion about the mall.

Doug Richert, co-chairman of the Downtown Fresno Coalition

A divided council voted for traffic, saying Fresno's 50-year attempt to make the mall work as originally planned had turned into failure.

A federal grant of nearly \$16 million is the foundation of Swearengin's funding.

The mayor's critics worked both sides of the street. They said the mall has value if properly maintained and aggressively marketed. They also said just about everything about this part of Fulton is so old that only a dreamer would think cars could return for a mere \$20 million.

The former thought gets lots of pushback at City Hall.

"As long as that's a mall, it's going to be dead," Council Member Lee Brand said.

But Tuesday's bids suggest the latter thought has merit.

"Where is that extra money going to come from?" Richert said.

That raises the newest Fulton Corridor question: What's next?

City officials at one point Tuesday afternoon wondered whether more money could be found. More funding from Sacramento is always mentioned in such situations.

Swearengin on Tuesday night closed the door on that idea. It's a \$20 million project, give or take a few hundred thousand – end of discussion.

Swearengin said the bid package has 112 individual "line items." She said staff will review those that came in especially high in the bids. The goal: See where money might be saved without harming the project's integrity.

The City Council at some point will get involved. Rejecting all bids and starting from scratch is one option. Swearengin said it's too early to chew on specifics.

Swearengin has time, but not a lot of it. She is termed out in January 2017. She's not worried about the project finishing in the next 14 months. But she very much wants it well underway by then.

"If this project were easy," Swearengin said, "it would have been done long ago."

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