

# Bitwise Industries readies its tech expansion in downtown Fresno

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For two years, [Bitwise Industries](#) and its cadre of upstart technology tenants have shoehorned themselves into about 7,800 square feet in a nondescript building at the northern fringe of downtown Fresno, in an area sometimes called the Mural District.

On Saturday, Fresno's self-proclaimed "mothership of technological education, collaboration and innovation" will lift the veil on its second, and much larger, downtown location. Bitwise South Stadium – named for its neighborhood south of the Chukchansi Park baseball stadium – is in the renovated, 100-year-old Phelan Garage building at the corner of Van Ness Avenue and Mono Street. It will enable Bitwise to house many more budding tech-sector businesses and expand its training programs to teach software coding to students from high school through adulthood.

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Between the first and second floors and a basement, the former auto dealership and garage – renewed at a cost of about \$7 million – provides almost 50,000 square feet of working space, dwarfing the capacity of the Bitwise Mural District offices that will continue to operate at San Joaquin and L streets. And even before it opens, every square foot of available space has already been leased, says Bitwise CEO Jake Soberal: "We'll have a waiting list from Day 1."



Dozens of technology companies – some homegrown in the Fresno area, others relocating to Fresno from other parts of the state and country – are leasing office space in the building. That doesn't count a collection of 45 to 50 other one- or two-person tech enterprises that will use the building's open workspace areas on a drop-in basis as a "desk hotel," Soberal says.

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Jake Soberal, Bitwise Industries CEO

"We'll have 40 technology companies in this building, and every single day between 800 and 1,000 individual technologists will come to this place to build, create and innovate the things that they do," Soberal says. "These are the people who grow the economy, who build new companies and create jobs. ... It is exactly the population that you want not just in Fresno, but that you want in downtown Fresno."

That point dovetails with goals set forth by Mayor Ashley Swearingin.

"Bitwise Industries has been a vital part of our effort to redefine downtown Fresno and establish a new identity that focuses on innovation and opportunity that will inevitably spread throughout our city," she says. "Thanks to their vision and the rebirth of our downtown, Fresno is attracting capable young professionals who embrace the promise of a revitalized city."

[Fresno Chamber of Commerce](#) CEO Al Smith says he's excited by the Bitwise expansion. "The idea that they are addressing a sector that's sort of unknown to the Fresno area is extremely positive for the community. About 90% of

the people who are active and interested in the technology industry are millennials, and those are the same people who tend to like urban living.

“When you put all that youth, all the technology and the location together, it creates a perfect scenario for revitalizing downtown,” Smith says.

About 1,200 people – Bitwise tenants along with some of Fresno’s movers and shakers – will get a sneak peek of the almost-finished offices, conference rooms and work areas at an invitation-only, black-tie event Saturday evening. “It’s a celebration of the arrival of the technology industry in downtown Fresno,” Soberal says, “and we wanted a party appropriate for the occasion.”

Those attending in their finery may have to dodge the debris and detritus of construction as they tour the building before adjourning to the parking lot for dinner and entertainment. Workers scrambled this week to string wiring, paint walls, hang drywall and seal the concrete floors, but some portions of the work will remain incomplete when Saturday rolls around. Classrooms and offices on the basement level are nearly completed, and offices on the second floor are close behind. It’s the first floor that has the most still to be accomplished. The net result: “People will get to see what this looks like in its various stages of completion,” Soberal says with a grin.

Commercial tenants will begin moving into their offices in November, and the building will be fully occupied by the end of the year.

Lee Ann Eager, president and CEO of the [Fresno County Economic Development Corporation](#), says the Bitwise expansion is a big step toward helping Fresno and the Valley diversify its economy and its job base. “Agriculture is always going to be No. 1 in the Valley and in Fresno County. But the technology industry that Bitwise is bringing here can really change the way that the Valley is seen all over the country.

“This is a new industry to the Valley, and people are getting excited,” Eager says. “When Bitwise started training our local workforce and people were getting so excited about doing this work, we knew they were onto something. ... We’re looking more at the computer technology industry and how we can expand (because) you don’t have to be in Silicon Valley to do this work.”

From the main entrance facing Van Ness Avenue on the building’s ground floor, an entry corridor will lead past offices and conference rooms, each enclosed by storefront glass walls. An open “collaborative workspace” with stand-up desks will line part of the corridor; to the rear, a robotics and rapid-prototyping lab is being built for use by high school robotics classes. The first floor also provides access to a 200-seat, stadium-style theater, repurposed from a concrete ramp left over from the building’s days as a car dealership to move vehicles between the first and second floors.

More leased office suites and common-use conference rooms occupy the second floor. Bitwise Industries is also relocating its offices from the cramped San Joaquin Street site, and its individual-membership division, The Hashtag, is moving from its original digs in the Tower District. The “co-working” space for freelancers or home-based tech workers to brainstorm and collaborate with others will be able to accommodate a membership of up to 800, compared with the 200-member limitation of the Tower District location.

In addition to a host of tech amenities, the Hashtag space is outfitted with large windows looking northward toward the heart of downtown. “This is the ecosystem for the next generation of people who will be starting companies and developing software,” Soberal says. “We thought they should get the best views in the building.”

Also on the second floor will be Shift3 Technologies, a division of Bitwise that pairs up a roster of its member technologists with outside clients in need of Web development or software services.

It’s in the basement of the building, however, where the already-animated Soberal really gets amped up. Like the other two floors, there are offices and conference rooms. But there are also six large classrooms where Geekwise Academy, yet another Bitwise division, will increase its capacity to teach computer and website coding to several

hundred students daily, from high school students who are bused in daily for half-day sessions to classes offered in collaboration with Fresno State and Fresno Pacific University, to evening sessions for working adults. Right now, those classes are scattered around several downtown locations because of a lack of space at the Mural District offices.

“The most exciting piece, of course, is the educational component,” Soberal says. “Every single day we have 350 students, from high school all the way to folks looking to change careers, who will be in this building learning to code. We’re equipping them to enter and grow the (technology) industry here in Fresno.”

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Lee Ann Eager, CEO, Fresno County Economic Development Corporation

Another feature of the basement will be a large tenant lounge with a kitchen, a seating area, video games, a pool table and large-screen TVs.

From the basement up to the second floor, each of the common-use conference rooms will be outfitted with the expected tables, chairs and white walls for writing with dry-erase pens. But each will also be decorated with a full-wall mural with a video game theme such as “Donkey Kong,” “HALO” or “The Legend of Zelda.” It’s an intentional nod to the culture of the millennials and other generations who grew up playing the video games in arcades or their own living rooms, Soberal says: “In everything about this building, form is driven by the geek function.”

That type of utility extends to the few non-technology tenants that will occupy the building. While the vast majority are tech or software companies, others are businesses that will complement and serve the tech sector. A Fresno law firm is placing its intellectual property specialists in the building, and an accounting firm that already serves about half of the Bitwise Mural District clients will also lease an office.

On the first floor, Tower District coffeehouse [Cafe Corazón](#) is opening a second location, and [Mabel's](#), a sandwich and snack shop, will relocate from another downtown site. The two eateries will be open to the public with a separate entrance and a common seating area, along with a 24-7 self-serve market where late-night tech workers can grab a snack or a drink. A UPS Store, with packaging and shipping services for Bitwise tenants and the public, will open in space north of the main entrance, Soberal says.

In the basement, Xcelerate Fitness – a chain with clubs in Selma, Reedley and Dinuba – will operate Xcelerate Underground, a 2,000-square-foot workout facility that will be open to Bitwise tenants and to the public.

And if Soberal and his partners in Bitwise Industries have their way, additional expansion of the technology sector could happen on nearby blocks south of Chukchansi Park. Bitwise has ideas for a technology campus that could ultimately add 1 million square feet of working space and employ tens of thousands of software developers, Web page designers, computer programmers and other technologists.

“The great part about it is that this is only their second project; he (Soberal) is talking about so much more,” says Smith, the Chamber of Commerce CEO. “If all of that comes to reality, what a great thing that would be for downtown Fresno.”

The EDC’s Eager agrees. “It’s not pie in the sky,” she says. “They’ve already shown it can happen. It’s just a matter of building on what they’ve already done.”

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