

# Swearingin rallies Fresno supporters for Fulton Mall reconstruction

By Tim Sheehan  
tsheehan@fresnobee.com

With a critical City Council vote on her legacy project to reopen downtown Fresno's Fulton Mall to traffic, Mayor Ashley Swearingin and supporters rallied on the mall to urge council members to award a \$22.4 million contract for the work.

The contract with American Paving Co., however, overshoots by \$2.4 million the money that the city has available to reconstruct the six-block stretch of Fulton Street, undoing the pedestrian mall that was built in 1964. That cost differential could be a sticking point when the City Council votes Thursday on the proposed contract.

Joined by Council President Oliver Baines, Council Member Lee Brand and downtown boosters, Swearingin described the mall as "the very place that used to be a vibrant center of culture and commerce, not just for the city of Fresno, but for the entire San Joaquin Valley."

She added that the T.W. Patterson building, which served as a backdrop for the rally, and other historic buildings on Fulton represented the skeleton of downtown Fresno, and that "while the bones of this once-great downtown have remained in place, sadly, the life left many decades ago."

\$20 million

Fresno's budget for Fulton Street reconstruction

\$22.4 million

Lowest bid for project

\$2.4 million

Gap between the budget and the lowest bid

American Paving submitted the lowest of three bids received in October for the mall reconstruction, but even that proposal came in higher than city officials anticipated, raising the prospect the city would scrap all three bids and start over with a new bidding process.

In a memo to the City Council in advance of Thursday's meeting, Public Works Director Scott Mozier recommended awarding the contract despite the budget overrun. "City staff feels the award of the construction contract ... is in the best interest of the project," Mozier wrote. "Rebidding the project could result in higher construction costs and a significant delay to the project."

Swearingin and Brand both said the city will continue to work with the contractor to find cost savings to bring the price within the city's budget.

As part of the approval package being sought from the City Council, Swearingin is asking the council to adopt a series of measures, including a non-appropriation clause in the contract, which she said "means that if for some reason those cost-saving measures cannot be found, the contract is null and void and we'll have to start over with a new design specification and bidding process."

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Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin

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Brand said he and other city officials “believe some of the stuff (in the bid) was overly padded, and we’ll go through that line item by line item.” He added that he thinks some savings are likely in such minutiae as light fixtures, traffic signals, concrete and asphalt work, and “a lot of the costs involved related to (the mall’s) art and water features.”

Brand added that the \$20 million budget, made up of state and federal grants without any money from the city’s general fund, also includes a 10 percent contingency. “We believe we’ll get the \$2.5 million” shaved from the contract, he said, “but once we get to that level, there’s still \$2 million on top of that in case of any unanticipated costs.”

Doug Richert, spokesman and co-chairman of the Downtown Fresno Coalition, which wants to preserve the mall as an art-laden pedestrian area, said after the rally that the project is likely to do little to bring about the downtown revitalization that Swearingin desires.

“People aren’t avoiding coming down to the Fulton Mall because they can’t drive here,” Richert said. “There’s nothing for them to come here for. Refurbishment of the mall can be what they come here for, in and of itself. In the future, areas like this are going to be even more valuable. City trends now are toward moving away from traffic areas and increasing pedestrian areas, and Fresno’s kind of doing the opposite of what everybody else is doing.”

The mall reconstruction, he added, “is going to destroy a unique, valuable cultural asset.”

But, Swearingin said, the mall “has proven over time to be an obstacle to revitalization” for the downtown district.

Tim Sheehan: [559-441-6319](tel:559-441-6319), [@TimSheehanNews](https://www.instagram.com/TimSheehanNews)

Fulton Mall reconstruction

The Fresno City Council will consider awarding a \$22.4 million contract for the Fulton Mall reconstruction project at its meeting Thursday. The item is scheduled for no earlier than 1:30 p.m. on the council’s agenda. The City Council meets at Fresno City Hall, 2600 Fresno St., in downtown Fresno.