

Transit hub gets green light

After 3-year delay, downtown Stockton construction project may start in spring

By Audrey Cooper

Record Staff Writer

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Construction on the major bus-transfer hub planned for an entire downtown Stockton block is expected in a few months -- three years later than first hoped.

San Joaquin Regional Transit District officials have pushed back the groundbreaking date several times, most recently to make sure they don't hurt the long-established businesses being relocated from the site.

Now, transit officials say they expect a groundbreaking ceremony sometime in late spring.

And it seems like that may stick.

Already about half of the businesses that used to be on the block have moved to new locations. Others are just waiting for new leases to start.

The \$11.6 million project requires the destruction of all but three building fronts on the block between Weber Avenue and California, Sutter and Channel streets. It will include 24 bus bays and a two-story building with district offices and retail shops.

It will replace the interim transfer station now awkwardly staged at a downtown intersection north of the proposed transit center.

Transit district spokeswoman Kari Wilson said it was unclear if the years of delays would affect the construction cost of the project.

"We just realize this was a big impact on people who will move and we're trying to be as flexible as possible with them," she said.

Some businesses complained throughout the process that they weren't getting enough money to relocate or weren't getting straight answers from the transit districts' representatives.

However, this week, most business owners had nothing but good things to say. Leases are being finalized and bus officials have been good about paying relocation costs, they said.

"If you would have asked last month, it would have been a different story," said Dr. David Benkle at Downtown Optometry.

He said intervention by county politicians and city redevelopment staffers saved his future lease at a Weber Avenue building, which is under renovation.

"It was scary for a while, because I really thought I would lose this practice and half of my livelihood," Benkle said.

Benkle may be the last business out of the block. He's not expected to move into his new office until around May 1, he said.

Others are already gone. A former insurance office has "We've Moved" signs in the window. Stockton Tailors owner Emilio Jauregui retired in November instead of relocating. Hundreds of old shoes still sit in the front window of a shoe-repair store that has closed.

A metal screen hangs in front of Sutter Hearing Aid Center, located downtown since 1961. The center still holds the "Sutter" name, even though it's now on Pacific Avenue.

"We love it here. We're really happy," owner Marckita "Marcie" Morris said

"The parking is better, and it's more convenient for our customers who live up north. Everything worked out."

The transit hub is one of several downtown transportation-related projects under way. The San Joaquin Council of Governments, a transportation-planning agency, marks the construction of its new building Thursday. An Altamont Commuter Express station and office is under renovation just four blocks from the bus hub on Channel Street.

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SUVs take their lumps again

Letter to the Editor, Merced Sun-Star
Wednesday, February 26, 2003

Editor: I would like to thank K. Tucker (Don't blame those SUV owners) for making one of the points I was trying to make. Many people buy SUVs without first reading any facts concerning them. Tucker said he (or she) traded in his Honda Civic to buy a mid-sized SUV because a SUV can carry more groceries and passengers than passenger cars and that they are much safer. These are two of the myths surrounding SUVs.

Mid-sized and large cars provide the same seating room as mid-sized SUVs. The trunks of larger cars often have just as much floor space for things like groceries as mid-sized SUVs. If one needs a taller cargo area or seating for 7, he could

buy a minivan (better on gas consumption and safety). Few families need more space than a minivan.

As for safety, SUV occupants die slightly more often than car occupants in crashes. The occupant death rate in crashes per million SUVs on the road is 6 percent higher than the death rate per million cars. Much of this has to do with the fact that SUVs are three times more likely to roll over than passenger cars. In collisions with other vehicles, however, SUVs are three times as likely to kill other drivers, inflicting another 1,000 unnecessary deaths a year among motorists who would have survived if hit instead by cars of the same weight.

These facts and many more can be found in: High and Mighty; SUV's: The World's Most Dangerous Vehicles and How They Got That Way by Keith Bradsheer (Detroit Bureau Chief of the New York Times 1996-2001).

And finally, concerning the last point made by K. Tucker; "it is not the SUV owner who has contributed to our country's oil dependence, it is our nation's leaders who have gotten us into this mess." Sure our nation's leaders have a lot to do with it. However, it is very easy to defer responsibility and to rationalize almost anything. That is the easy way out of making difficult, morally responsible choices. Most reasonable people realize that SUVs, especially the larger ones, add significantly to our oil dependency, pollute too much and are unsafe for their occupants and other vehicles they share the road with. While it is true that some people have a legitimate use for a SUV, most do not. There are better, more socially responsible choices that can be made. Patriotism involves more than simply flying an American flag from the antenna of your vehicle. A true patriot is willing to sacrifice his own, narrow, self-interests, serve his country and make responsible choices in her best interests.

Byron Appel
Merced

Florez seeks public input on solutions to dirty air

The Bakersfield Californian
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Kern County residents will have a chance Friday to let their state leaders know how they feel about air pollution.

The state Senate Select Committee on Central Valley Air Quality will hold a hearing at 10 a.m. Friday at the Kern Agriculture Pavilion, 3300 E. Belle Terrace in Bakersfield.

The committee, chaired by Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, was formed in response to worsening air quality in the valley, which now has the second-worst smog in

the nation after the Los Angeles basin. The Bakersfield hearing is the fourth in a series of 13 hearings throughout the valley. Its purpose is to gather evidence and testimony that may be used to create new air-quality laws.

Florez has already introduced a series of 10 bills to clean up the valley's air, and he'll be seeking public input on those proposals as well as the general state of the smog problem. Among other things, the bills would remove the exemption from smog rules that farmers currently enjoy, add three public members to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District Governing Board, eliminate open burning of farm waste, and require a buffer around new dairies.

For more information on the hearing, which could last three hours or more, call one of Florez's offices in Bakersfield at 395-2622, or in Sacramento at (916) 445-4641.

We've been had by board

Letters to the Editor, Bakersfield Californian

March 4, 2003

I appreciate Herb Benham's characterization that ours is "not the most discriminating Board of Supervisors... anything that smells faintly of jobs even... missile silos..."

And he's sure right that the "public has power and it doesn't," though it seems to me lately it's more "doesn't" than "has."

Anyway, we've been had by the board and might as well make the most of it -- which means groveling before Tejon Ranch, ever hopeful they won't do more damage later on if they can make a few more bucks.

Now our Board of Supervisors is another matter. Let's all take a deep breath so we can remember what the air was like in February 2003 and bear in mind that some on the board must be coming up for election soon. Not soon enough for me.

GILBERT GIA, Bakersfield