

Growing big, growing small in Fresno

Walmart supercenter, neighborhood market in works for area

Chuck Harvey – STAFF WRITER

Walmart believes a 107,000 square-foot former Mervyn's location is a good fit for a Fresno supercenter as it kicks off a multimillion-dollar project to refurbish the interior of the store located at Ashlan and Blackstone avenues for a summer opening.

The retail giant, now building smaller neighborhood stores as well, also likes the 41,000 square-foot size of the former Cedar Lanes bowling alley that it is refurbishing at the intersection of Shields and Cedar avenues in Fresno.

Walmart expects good support for a supercenter and the smaller neighborhood Walmart market scheduled to open in



CHUCK HARVEY | Walmart expects to complete the refurbishing of a former Mervyn's location in Central Fresno by the summer. The 107,000 square-foot building has been empty for five years.

2015. One of the reasons it is downsizing some stores is the growth in e-commerce sales. Shoppers can order items online and pick them up at their nearest Walmart store.

Still, Walmart plans to continue building supercenters that range from 100,000 square

feet to 180,000 square feet.

The bigger stores will be built in locations where vehicle and shopper numbers are high. One concern with the Ashlan and Blackstone location is an adequate number of parking spaces.

Walmart shares the park-

ing lot with other tenants in the shopping center. However, Steve Rontell, broker with Colliers International in Fresno, said the other tenants, including a furniture store and Petco store, are not heavy users of the

Walmart | 3

Walmart | from 1

lot.

Also, an El Pollo Loco restaurant at Ashlan and Blackstone avenues has its own parking area, Romtoll said.

In addition, the new Walmart will have parking in the rear of the store for employees, said Romtoll, who represented the landlord in the lease transaction.

"We believe there is sufficient parking to serve our customers," said Della Garcia, director of communications for Walmart.

The supercenter will employ approximately 250 workers on a full and part time basis. Average hourly pay is \$13.68.

Garcia said hourly employees would have the opportunity to work toward higher-paying management positions.

A hiring center will open near the Ashlan and Blackstone avenues location in early summer, Walmart reported.

Romtoll said the deal with Walmart has been in the works for years. He said Walmart officials wanted to make sure the new store was not too close to other Walmart stores. Also, it had to pencil out in terms of attracting shoppers and potential sales.

Smaller stores inquired about the space, but it was hoped the store would not have to be split up.

"So Walmart was a good fit," Romtoll said.

The Ochinerio family of Fresno leased the Ashlan and Blackstone avenues property to Walmart.

City officials were also pleased that Walmart decided to lease the space.

"I'm so happy that Walmart picked Central Fresno," said Clinton Olivier, city councilman for the 7th district. "I only see benefits."

Olivier said he is also glad Walmart is building a neighborhood store at Shields and Cedar avenues.

Olivier added that in campaigning for reelection, he has not found any opposition to the stores. "I knock on doors and not one person has told me I am disappointed that Walmart is coming."

However, he pointed out that Walmart did not face public comment at a public hearing. Because Walmart is moving into an existing retail building, neither a hearing nor a permit from the city council or planning commission is required for the refurbishing projects.

Still, the work is seen as a big improvement, considering the Mervyn's store has been vacant for more than five years.

"We welcome this private investment along the city's major north-south commercial corridor," said Ashley Swearingin, mayor of Fresno, in a release. "Projects like these, coupled with the city's vision for improving Blackstone Avenue with public infrastructure will help give new life to this critical commercial corridor."

Some sprucing up at the location is also expected to discourage prostitution, gangs, crime and graffiti — all cited as problems in the area.

Most of the work and expense in upgrading the Mervyn's building has been in installing cold cases for perishable groceries, Garcia said. She said the exterior of the building would remain mostly the same, but would include new signage and decoration.

Reeve-Knight Construction of Roseville is doing the refurbishing work.

Along with food, the supercenter will carry value-priced general merchandise including apparel, electronics, toys and sporting goods. Food offerings include organic selections, fresh dairy and meat departments and fruits and vegetables.

The store also features a pharmacy.

"It will be one-stop shopping," Garcia said.

The Walmart Neighborhood Market at Shields and Cedar avenues will offer a full supermarket line of groceries along with some household products, pet supplies and pharmacy services.

Fresno's first neighborhood market opened near Herndon and Wilcox avenues in May 2013, followed by a Clovis location near Clovis and Shaw avenues in September 2013. Visalia received the Valley's first neighborhood market in March 2013. Each store typically employs about 65 people.

Garcia added that supercenters also have a positive impact on the community. They help to revitalize the area and bring back local shoppers, Garcia said.

Also, businesses tend to invest in new stores once a strong anchor store is in place, she said.

Chuck Harvey | Reporter can be reached at 438-1806 or e-mail chuck@thebusinessjournal.com