

Homebuilder has inner-city project Fresno wants, but neighbors fight back

By George
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- If You Go:

What: Hearing on rezone application for southeast Fresno infill project.

When: 10 a.m. Thursday

Where: Fresno Council Chamber, 2600 Fresno St.

A small proposed residential project is shaking up Fresno City Hall's big plans for community rebirth.

Turns out actually doing something to stop the evils of sprawl can make it hard to tell the good side from the bad side.

A local developer wants to take advantage of the city's new-found passion for infill development by building three single-family houses on an empty lot in southeast Fresno.

Niko Homes, whose investors have interests throughout the state, has been trying for the better part of a year to get the green light to develop the small (about two-thirds of an acre) site on Winery Avenue between Washington and McKenzie avenues.

But neighbors are fighting back. Some say three houses is too many. Others say their privacy could be compromised if the homes are two stories. All fear what such change might do to neighborhood integrity.

The fight has already been to the City Council. Developers and neighbors mounted their soapbox Oct. 9, each claiming justice as an ally. A nervous council punted, asking everyone to negotiate once again in good faith.

Didn't work. Niko Homes returns to City Hall on Thursday, asking the council to approve the rezone application that will let the project proceed.

Positions are harder than a rock.

"That lot is too small for three houses," said Sara Rojas, who has lived on the northeast corner of Winery and McKenzie since 1961. "Some people have four or five cars. Where are they going to park them?"

Council Member Clint Olivier, who represents the area, said the project threatens the "country feel" of the neighborhood.

"I agree with my constituents — it does not fit the rest of the neighborhood," Olivier said.

Niko Homes founder/Chief Executive Sassan Golafshan said the three new houses will boost neighborhood property values while getting rid of an eyesore.

"It's a no-brainer," Golafshan said.

City Manager Bruce Rudd said the administration of Mayor Ashley Swearingin supports the project.

"This is infill development," Rudd said. "It is consistent with our path forward."

But there's more here than another of the land-use conflicts normal to any city hall.

Since Swearingin took office in January 2009, she has vowed to rejuvenate inner-city Fresno. A new general plan focused on infill development is to be the catalyst. The result is to be vibrant, happy neighborhoods that had been left behind by the last century's rush to the north. Among the happiest would be a new breed of developer who discovers the profit as well as the righteousness from infill.

That new general plan is headed to the council in December or early 2015. Yet, already the council is faced with a "split the baby" dilemma. Which virtue is more important in that plan: infill change or neighborhood status quo?

Council Member Paul Caprioglio on Oct. 9 summed up the city's challenge: "This is a test case."

High hopes for a plan

The context is the 2035 general plan that has been moving through the City Hall pipeline with all the speed of molasses.

City officials have been working on an update of Fresno's blueprint for growth since at least 2009. Past blueprints have a checkered reputation among many.

City population has exploded since the end of World War II, and now tops a half-million. But with that growth came what former Mayor Alan Autry called "the tale of two cities." Simply put, much of the north and substantial parts of the southeast are relatively new and affluent. Much of the older city is home to the poverty and social woe that consistently lands Fresno on national lists of urban despair.

A City Hall besotted by the charms of suburbia supposedly was at fault. But things were to change as of April 19, 2012. That was when the City Council approved a theme for the new general plan. The future was to be full of infill residential and commercial growth.

Council chamber walls shook from the cheers of infill supporters. There were seemingly endless questions still to be answered. What constitutes an infill neighborhood? Do infill developers deserve public subsidies? Should some older neighborhoods be made a priority?

But at the heart of the supporters' joy was the conviction that directing the power of City Hall on infill development would transform the social and economic fabric of inner-city Fresno with nary a peep of protest from residents so blessed.

The public comment period on the draft 2035 general plan ended Oct. 9. The plan has hundreds of pages. It comes with a reformed development code and new neighborhood plans, such as one for downtown's Fulton Corridor.

But the document that best sums up Fresno's immense hope is the city's compilation of public comments on the new plan. It's 800 pages of faith in the power of planning expertise and governmental authority.

"I want my community to be safe and healthy," said a woman identified only as Sarah at a 2011 workshop. "I want to be within walking distance of most major necessities — school, work, entertainment and recreation, retail."

Luisa Lopez at a 2011 workshop said she wants to live "in a city where both the more affluent and the less fortunate can co-exist."

Infill developers are the missing ingredient.

Strong cases for both

Thursday's hearing will be full of facts and different interpretations of them.

Niko Homes' Golafshan said he and his partners bought the parcel of about 28,000 square feet several years ago. There's a house at the north end (corner of Winery/Washington) occupied by a family that's renting. The house with fenced backyard takes up about 8,800 square feet.

That leaves about 19,000 square feet of bare dirt. Golafshan wants to subdivide this into three smaller lots — two of 6,000 square feet each in the middle and a corner spot (Winery/McKenzie) of about 7,200 square feet. He would build houses on all three lots.

Each house would have a two-car garage with driveway. Golafshan would build curbs, gutters, sidewalks and erect street lights. Plans for the houses are still evolving. Golafshan said they'll carry prices in the \$200,000 range.

Everyone agrees many of the nearby homes aren't that pricey.

The neighborhood opponents have many concerns.

Rojas, for example, lives on a large lot across Winery from the project. She's in the city, but the houses on her side of Winery to the north are in the county. Like Rojas' lot, they're good-sized, reflecting the rural-residential nature of the area before Fresno growth got there. Rojas thinks three single-family houses on the project site will stick out like a sore thumb.

"The investors are making this proposal merely to make money without considering the integrity of our neighborhood since they will not live there," Rojas said in a letter to City Hall.

Rueben and Cynthia Silva live on Washington, two doors west of the project's rental.

"I don't want to be the experiment" that is infill development, Cynthia Silva said.

Rueben Silva said the developer will walk away from the project with pockets full of money.

"All I'll get is congestion and headaches," he said.

City Manager Rudd said 6,000-to-7,000-square-foot residential lots are typical in that part of Fresno. He acknowledged that some areas near the project site don't have sidewalks. He said Golafshan's infrastructure will nudge the city to fill in the gaps elsewhere in the neighborhood.

Golafshan rejects suggestions that he build just two houses. The numbers make a smaller project unprofitable, he said.

Neighborhood critics, even with Olivier on their side, are only cautiously optimistic at stopping the project.

"They've got a lawyer and we don't," Rojas said.

She said she's not against change, but questions how this project is unfolding. She said time isn't on her side.

"I sometimes think they're just waiting for me to die," said the 85-year-old Rojas.

Golafshan said he wants only what's best for Fresno.

"Our project will pretty much set the tone for all the other infill landowners who say, 'We want to bring jobs and improve neighborhoods by building new houses.'"

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