

## City Council to consider Fulton Corridor project ideas



# THE CITY BEAT

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Posted by George Hostetter on October 29, 2014

The Fresno City Council on Thursday will find itself with a "put up or shut up" moment concerning the Fulton Corridor.

This call to action refers to the private sector as well as government.

The council is scheduled at 10:30 a.m. to pick a winner among three proposals to do something special for the corridor's south end.

The corridor from Tuolumne Street on the north end to Inyo Street on the south, of course, is still known as Fulton Mall. Mayor Ashley Swearingin wants to open the six blocks of pedestrian mall to cars. She's getting a fight from mall supporters, but she's winning every round so far. Motorists could be cruising Fulton like the old days within a year.

It's no secret that the corridor, located as it is smack in the middle of downtown, needs a lot of help. The place isn't much fun to walk through, let alone visit for any length of time. That's where Thursday's council action comes in.

City Hall asked developers for ideas on building something -- anything! -- on the corridor's most southern portion. We're talking the area from Kern Mall to Inyo, on both sides of Fulton Mall. The area on the east side includes the old Gottschalks complex. The area on the west side includes the old Berkeley's building and a parking lot along Inyo.

The city got three proposals.

One is from Grapevine Advisors, LLC out of Sherman Oaks. The proposal is long on background stuff and short on specifics. Grapevine would focus on an "International Market Place." There would be a farmer's market, housing and retail.

The other two come from local developers, There's one from the team of Mehmet Noyan and Terance Frazier. There's one from Darius Assemi. Both proposals have enough details to make them most interesting.

Noyan-Frazier pitch a two-phase project.

Phase one has a nine-story tower on a portion of the project area's west side (this is now mostly the parking lot). There would be six floors of apartments, two floors of retail and parking on the ground level. There also would be two levels of below-ground parking.

The tower would be connected by a sky-walk to the existing six-story parking garage (the well-known circular garage) across Fulton Mall to the east.

Phase two has a matching nine-story tower on the remaining portion of the project's west side. The historic Gottschalks department store building would be turned into retail/office space.

Noyan-Frazier give no details on the really interesting stuff. "Due to the preliminary nature of this project, the total project cost, ownership, and financing structure is to be determined," their proposal says.

Assemi also would build in phases. In the beginning, he would focus on the project area's west side. For example, the

southern portion (from the current home of Downtown Fresno Partnership to Inyo) would be a mixed-use development. There would be six free-standing buildings (three stories each) around a landscaped courtyard. There would be 50 housing units (studio, one- and two-bedroom apartments) plus retail. Nine of the two-bedroom units would be live-work apartments.

Assemi also would turn the old Berkeley's building into something. Perhaps a restaurant in the beginning, then apartments. Perhaps a restaurant and apartments.

Assemi pegs the cost at nearly \$10.9 million. He proposal says "we anticipate using favorable conventional financing in conjunction with public funds as available."

Frazier on Wednesday declined to comment. It's too early to be talking to the media, he said.

I did get hold of Assemi. He made two key points.

First, Assemi said City Hall is keen on having a nine-story building on the site. He said he didn't propose such a big building because the numbers don't pencil out. Going so high is expensive but the Fresno market can't bear the higher rents to justify such expense, he said. Such a big building might pencil out if it got a lot of public subsidy, he said.

There's not a lot of public subsidy out there, he said.

Second, Assemi said he got a letter from city officials saying his proposal has already been rejected by an in-house review committee.

"If somebody else's project is approved, we hope it gets built expeditiously," Assemi said. "We want to see a beautiful and successful project along the Fulton Corridor."

City Manager Bruce Rudd on Wednesday said the committee will recommend that the council choose Noyan-Frazier, with the understanding that a firm deal (i.e. more details, sincere commitments) gets done in the next 120 days. Absent that, Rudd said, there will be another request for developer proposals. Rudd said the committee wants something at that end of Fulton Corridor that would be a destination spot for the region.

I don't know much about Grapevine. But I do know about Noyan-Frazier and Assemi. Their battle for the project is like heavyweight champions going at each other. Noyan helped develop Palm Bluffs, the retail/commercial development near Pinedale that is every bit as transformative to the north Fresno landscape as nearby River Park. Frazier had decades of development experience. Assemi and his family have singlehandedly transformed Uptown with their innovative mixed-use developments.

Here's what I find most interesting about the Noyan-Frazier and Assemi proposals for the southern part of Fulton Corridor.

The city's request to developers also asked for ideas for a 1.5-acre portion of Chukchansi Park. Yes, we're talking the downtown baseball stadium.

This site covers the parking lot along Inyo (I think employees mostly use it) plus a part of the storage area where the Grizzlies keep the portable stage (a depressing and expensive legacy of the unbridled civic hopes from 15 years ago) This site would be only a few yards from the right field fence. Even a banjo hitter could occasionally put a ball into this site.

Seems like the site has a lot of exciting possibilities.

Noyan-Frazier want to build a two-story parking garage there.

Assemi wants to build a multi-story mixed-use building there -- retail on the bottom, residential on top.

It makes no difference to me who wins this war. I hope only that the winner actually builds something and City Hall actually helps get the job done.

However, it strikes me that the pivotal piece of land in this debate is the 1.5-acre spot inside the stadium, not the Berkeley's-Gottschalks area.

It would take a gambler to do something special with the 1.5-acre stadium site. That's what greatness requires.

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