

Fresno council approves infill housing project

By George
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A dirt lot, a parking garage, a big dream — leave it to the Fresno City Hall to find a common theme in it all.

The City Council worked well into the lunch hour Thursday to approve a controversial infill housing project, pick a new manager of city-owned parking facilities and choose a developer to turn the Fulton Corridor into an entertainment powerhouse.

Whew! Nurturing inner-city Fresno's rebirth is varied as well as exhausting.

The abridged version of events is this:

- The council on a 4-3 vote gave the green light to Niko Homes to build three houses on an empty lot in southeast Fresno. Neighbors said two houses are enough. The developer said it's three or zero. Council Members Clint Olivier, Sal Quintero and Oliver Baines voted no, but gave no hint it was a life-or-death issue for them. After all, "infill" has replaced "bankruptcy" as City Hall's favorite word.
- The council showed a bit more solidarity when it awarded a five-year contract to SP Plus Corp. to handle parking duties in downtown and at various parks. Ace Parking was in charge, but its contract had expired. Olivier and Blong Xiong voted no on an issue that revolved in part on whether Ace was carrying its weight in the downtown revitalization battle.
- It was a slam-dunk (7-0) when the council decided a team headed by developers Mehmet Noyan and Terance Frazier has the best plan to build something special on the southern part of Fulton Mall. The council liked the Noyan-Frazier vision of brand-new tall buildings at Fulton/Inyo Street full of housing and entertainment spots. The council was most fond of something actually getting built.

It's no secret that Mayor Ashley Swearengin, with her nearly finished 2035 general plan, is keen on rebuilding Fresno's older neighborhoods. Thursday's council meeting was another step in that direction.

Niko Homes has owned a lot of about two-thirds of an acre on Winery Avenue between Washington and McKenzie Avenues for several years. A rental house is at one end of the site. The rest is bare dirt. The question was whether to turn the undeveloped portion into three single-family houses or two. City Hall, neighbors and developers had been debating the issue for months.

Olivier said a compromise clearly wasn't in the air.

"I'll be standing with the constituents of the Seventh District," Olivier said.

Council Member Lee Brand said neighborhood critics will quickly see the benefit of houses on what now is a magnet for litter.

"In the end," Brand told the critics, "you will have a better neighborhood."

Reuben Silva was among the protesting neighbors nursing their disappointment outside the council chamber.

"Well, we tried," he said.

The search for someone to manage the city's parking facilities turned into a fight.

Some downtown advocates said Ace employees staffing the garages and lots were ineffective goodwill ambassadors for the area's charms. Staff said Ace's proposal was too expensive.

Ace representatives said the company has been a valued partner in downtown revitalization. They said to line up their bid next to the bid from SP Plus is not to compare apples to apples.

Olivier said the contract, understandably important to the bidders, is a tempest in a teapot to most Fresnans. He said just about everyone hates paying for downtown parking, regardless of who takes the money.

City Hall has been trying for 50 years to get the private sector to build something on the six-block Fulton Mall that makes California's jaw drop. Noyan and Frazier pitched a plan that, among other things, proposes a nine-story building at Fulton and Inyo street. The council gave Noyan and city staff 120 days to put flesh on the idea.

Noyan said the proposed project is a "long-term" affair. He said he's counting on Swearingin to successfully bring cars back to Fulton Corridor.

Quintero said he dislikes "long-term" when developers use it to describe their projects. His implication: Such proposals tend to be all talk.

City Hall labeled the proposed project area "South Stadium," referring to nearby Chukchansi Park.

If the label sounds familiar, it should. City Hall and Forest City Development nearly a decade ago teamed up for a half-billion-dollar South Stadium project.

No secret how that turned out.

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