

Apartments planned next to Fresno State fraternities typify challenge for infill projects

By George
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Two ideas are at the heart of Mayor Ashley Swearengin's 2035 general plan update.

Infill development and higher-density residential living will combine to transform Fresno, she believes.

Here's an example of the challenges this might cause.

A proposed apartment complex made its way to City Hall this fall. The developer, a company in Newport Beach, wanted to build a four-story complex for Fresno State students.

There would be parking and an activity room on the ground level. There would be 10 apartments on each of the other levels. Each level would have six four-bedroom apartments and four two-bedroom apartments.

Total: 30 units, 96 bedrooms. Each bedroom would have its own bathroom.

The project's size required the developer to file for a conditional use permit. That's why City Hall was involved.

Except perhaps for all those bathrooms, the project was nothing unusual in a town the size of Fresno.

Well, one detail was eye-catching: the location. The developer wanted to build on .79 of an acre at 1470 Bulldog Lane, a short walk west of Bulldog Stadium.

The site (now bare dirt) is sandwiched between the Sigma Chi and Delta Sigma Phi fraternity houses. Several fraternity houses to the north are only a few yards from the site. A stone's throw further to the north are two rows of sorority houses.

Greek Mall, the center of Fresno State fraternity and sorority culture for decades, seemed destined to get a new and unusual tenant.

Spoiler alert: The project is all but dead. Project opponents called City Hall. The Bee started poking around. A representative of the developer on Thursday left a voice message at The Bee, saying the project would be sidelined until further notice.

The caller gave no hint whether it would ever return.

That's probably just as well. The project apparently failed to find a single champion in the neighborhood or at City Hall.

The toughest critic probably was Dan Waterhouse, a Fresno State graduate and member of the alumni advisory board of the local Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity (the chapter house is a former apartment complex on Shaw Avenue). Waterhouse contacted District 4 Council Member Paul Caprioglio, who represents the area, and Fresno State officials.

Waterhouse had many concerns. They boiled down to this: The project was a bad fit for the site.

"It would stick out like a sore thumb," Waterhouse told The Bee.

Based on city records and interviews by The Bee, Waterhouse had a lot of company. City and university officials were tactful. But, they made clear, they doubted whether the tiny lot at 1470 Bulldog Lane was best suited for a 30-unit, 96-bed apartment complex.

The project raises all the pros and cons of a general plan that puts so much emphasis on infill development.

On the plus side, project drawings suggest a first-class, private-sector apartment complex would have been built on what is now weeds. Construction workers would earn paychecks. The local tax base would get a boost. The out-of-town developer might take a liking to Fresno and build again.

On the negative side, the cultural integrity of a tiny but historic Fresno neighborhood — that slice of land bounded by Bulldog Lane on the south, El Dorado Park on the west, Barstow Avenue on the north and Millbrook Avenue on the east known as Greek Mall — would have been compromised. Greek Mall would never be the same.

Council Member Lee Brand several years ago chaired a council subcommittee on infill development. City staff submitted a map showing (in red) the locations of bare lots in Fresno. The map looked like it had measles.

Each dot represents an opportunity to change the status quo. Each dot could be a battle like 1470 Bulldog Lane.

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