

Fresno Land Deal Could Clean Up Long Blighted Downtown Spot

By Jeffrey
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The Fresno City Council could approve a land deal Thursday that could clean up a long blighted plot of downtown. However, the total sale of the land is a small portion of the money the city spent acquiring it.

The land is at the corner of Stanislaus and L streets in downtown Fresno, right next to a long vacant gas station that has been the source of hundreds of calls to police. A previous attempt to rehabilitate the site with more than \$1,000,000 in federal Housing and Urban Development funds collapsed.

Credit Google Street View

Now, the council is considering selling the land to a local developer for \$147,000 but that money wouldn't be due for 30 years. The developer, Mark Astone, already owns the gas station adjacent to the 1-and-a-half acre lot.

Astone says he wants to build a 70 unit residential building with commercial space on the ground floor, and getting the land for no cost upfront is key to making that happen.

"Primarily just to conserve cash. We have a lot of outlay going in terms of design, property requirements, there are permitting fees. There is a lot going on on the front end of this deal. So we asked the city to carry the paper for a while," Astone said.

The land was valued at \$147,00 by an independent appraiser, Astone said.

Astone does not think it will take that long to pay back the money. He also notes that the deal includes performance measures that require the project to begin within six months and be complete within two years.

In a written statement, City Manager Bruce Rudd said "We're pleased that the buyer has presented us with a comprehensive plan to develop the entire corner of Stanislaus and Van Ness that meets our downtown revitalization goals, so it only made sense to sell him the parcels at their appraised value while offering an incentive that gives him the best chance to succeed. It's important to note that the costs the City incurred when closing out a previous development proposal for that location triggered wholesale changes in how we approve and administer federal funding for projects of this type. We're positive that the current development plan is not only financially viable but will be an attractive addition to the downtown landscape when it's completed."

Astone's vision for the building is to provide not just apartments, but also for boutique style retail along the ground floor fronting the side walk. The land is just a short walk from the Fulton Mall that some believe will find new life once it is converted back into a street.

"It's just been one of those things where we got a whole truck load of lemons and made some pretty good lemonade," Astone quipped.

The site has been targeted for development before and the city secured more than \$1,000,000 dollars in HUD money. The project never happened and HUD subsequently reduced its spending in Fresno over the course of three years to recoup the money. Still, that represents more than \$2,000,000 in cash and lost funds on a site that is now selling for \$150,000.