

Belmont to review another housing, retail development aimed to transform vibrant, denser downtown

It includes 65 affordable rental apartment units and 15 for-sale townhouses

The Firehouse Square development in Belmont's downtown area will consist of 65 affordable rental apartment units, 3,750 square feet of retail space and 15 for-sale townhouses.

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In a strategic effort to revitalize Belmont's downtown area into a vibrant, dense, pedestrian-friendly hub, the Belmont City Council — for the second time in several weeks — is poised to approve a long-awaited mixed-use development project.

[The Firehouse Square development](#) — located on city-owned property on the corner of El Camino Real and O'Neill Ave. — will consist of a four-story, mixed-use building with 65 affordable rental apartment units, a manager's unit and 3,748 square feet of retail and commercial space. It also includes a 15-unit townhouse complex, which will be for-sale at market rate.

The city council has approved an exemption from the California Environmental Quality Act for the project. It will take a final vote on the development at its next meeting on June 11. The city's planning commission approved the project in early May and city staff has recommended that the council give it the final stamp of approval.

The decision on Firehouse Square will come just weeks after the city gave the green light to a 250-unit apartment building one block over at 1325 Old County Road. The apartment development, known as Artisan Crossing and proposed by developer Windy Hill Property Ventures, is the largest apartment building that the city has seen in decades.

Belmont, which extends about 4.6 square miles and encompasses a population of about 26,000, does not have a true, centralized downtown area. The city, however, is hoping to change that by making mixed-use development projects like Firehouse Square and Artisan Crossing in the [Belmont Village Specific Plan area a priority](#).

The village is an 80-acre portion of the city centered around its Caltrain station at the intersection of El Camino Real and Ralston Ave. It was designated as a priority to develop by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission and the Association of Bay Area Governments because of its proximity to transit, jobs and retail space.

In the midst of a housing crunch across the Bay Area, Belmont created the plan as an initial step toward meeting the demand for housing while also balancing it with office and retail space.

“The plan will strive to fulfill the community’s vision for the area, preserve and enhance the Village’s livability, and allow for new growth, economic activity, and investment,” the city’s Belmont Village Specific Plan reads.

Development of the Firehouse Square site, which is less than a quarter mile from the Belmont Caltrain, has been a goal of the city for more than a decade. After an initial proposal was scrapped in 2007, the city and developer Sares Regis entered an exclusive negotiating agreement in August 2013.

Sares Regis is partnering with MidPen Housing to create three floors of affordable housing units above the building’s retail space.

Of the 65 affordable units, nine are [reserved for individuals earning up to](#) \$30,800, 13 for those earning up to \$51,350, 27 for those earning up to \$61,620 and 16 for those making up to \$82,200.

When the development went before the planning commission in early May, the commissioners commended the city and staff for coming up with a project that accomplished the city’s strategic plan.

“I think it’s an exceptional project,” Commissioner Nathan Majeski said during the May 7 planning meeting. “... And it shows us that if you allow it and come up with a good idea of what there could be, maybe people will build it, and it’s happening so it’s pretty neat.”

But despite the commission’s approval of the project, they did voice concerns over a lack of parking at the site.

The MidPen apartment building will include an underground parking garage that can accommodate 47 cars for all of the apartment residents — less than a parking space per unit. Retail customers will have to resort to street parking.

The limited number of parking spots, however, satisfies the state density bonus law, which allows affordable housing developments near transit to offer merely a half of a parking space per unit.

The commission urged the city and developer to work together to come up with a creative solution to the parking shortage, such as a residential parking permit program. Whether any new parking solutions will be proposed won’t be known until the June 11 council meeting.

“I just ask that we all work as a team to figure out how to manage it because I think it is a little concerning, and I don’t want Good Shepherd or any of the other residents in those areas to suffer as a result of this,” Commissioner Amy Goldfarb said during the meeting.