

# Belmont's Firehouse Square is approved – finally

Council gives green light to 80 new units near downtown

By Zachary Clark Daily Journal staff 3 hrs ago



Artist's rendering of the Firehouse Square development in Belmont.

After years of delays, the long-awaited mixed-use development in Belmont known as Firehouse Square has finally been approved.

The project was conceived in 2012 and repeatedly hit roadblocks along the way, causing consternation among residents and officials alike. The most recent delay was for soil testing, which recently was resolved though it lingered for a few months. At a meeting Tuesday, that frustration was replaced with joy.

“This is the most excited I’ve been on the dais for quite a long time,” said Councilman Charles Stone. “This has been a true labor of love, there were times when I thought the baby was never going to be born. ... I’m glad we were able to stay the course and get here today.”

Located at 1300 El Camino Real on a vacant city-owned parcel, the project is the result of a partnership between developer Sares Regis and nonprofit developer MidPen Housing.

MidPen is responsible for the mixed-use building, which includes 65 affordable units, exceeding the city's affordable housing requirement by 36 units. Those units are a mix of studios and one- to three-bedroom apartments reserved for those earning between 30% and 80% of area median income, or \$30,800 to \$82,200 a year. Residents will be chosen by a lottery system and preference will be given to those who live and work in Belmont.

“Anything that we can do as a city to help people stay in the community we grew up in, age in the community they grew up in and welcome new people to the community so we can have a diverse populace — this is a project that sees that through,” said Mayor Davina Hurt. “The housing is dearly needed and there's housing at all income levels.”

MidPen has managed to secure more than \$14 million from local sources for the project and hopes to supplement that with additional state grants.

The MidPen building also includes 3,748 square feet of ground-floor retail and will be adjacent to 15 townhomes by Sares Regis to be sold at market rates. The apartment building will be four stories tall and the townhomes will be two stories.

There will be open space between the two buildings, some of it publicly accessible, and a subterranean garage for the apartments can accommodate 47 cars while each of the townhomes will have a two-car garage. The development is also walking distance from Caltrain.

As originally proposed, the MidPen building will feature Spanish-style architecture, the townhomes will be in the craftsman style and the historic firehouse façade will be preserved.

During the meeting, Stone described the project as a “linchpin” for the city's downtown and responded to doubts about the feasibility of retail on the site.

“I firmly believe it’s the right location for retail, it’s walkable from our downtown core and it may be a challenge, it may take a while, but I think something incredible will go in that space,” he said. “Building this type of housing and creating a critical mass of people who will utilize retail opportunities is how we make those spaces marketable.”

The project will maintain 51 parking spaces along Fifth Avenue in a front-in angled configuration after a proposal to reconfigure that parking lot into reverse-in angled parking and eliminate 16 stalls did not set well with councilmembers.

The project also includes a class III bike lane, bulbouts, new crosswalks, additional street lighting and the undergrounding of overhead power lines on Fifth Avenue from O’Neill Avenue to Broadway and down to Civic Lane.

“This is exactly what we need as an anchor to our downtown,” Hurt said.