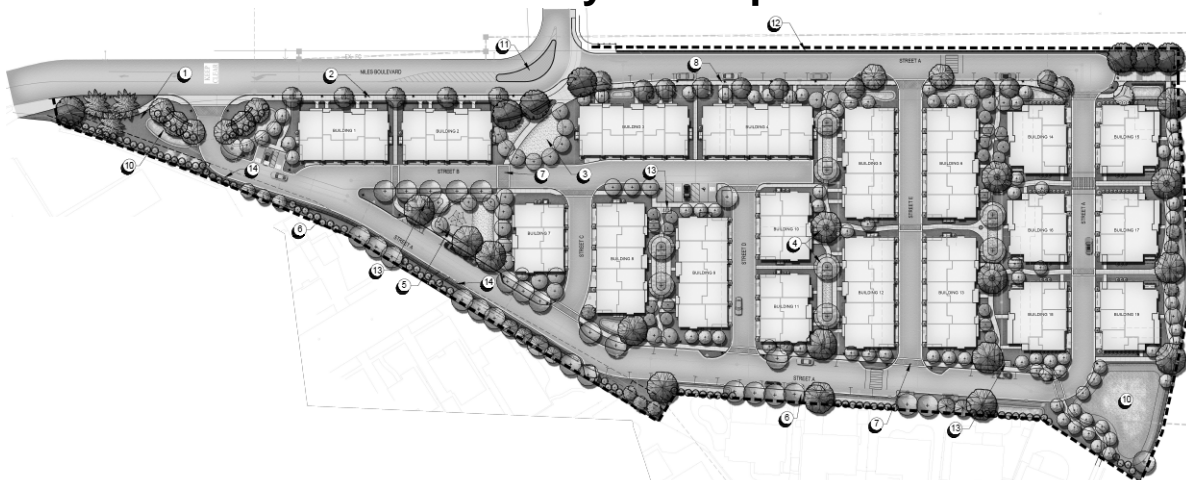


Shape Our Fremont

Third Niles Gateway Plan Up for Review



A revised proposal to build residential units on the vacant Henkel property in Niles has been submitted for formal review. The proposal is the result of several iterations of plans, lawsuits, and appeals involving the developer Valley Oak Partners, the City of Fremont, and various resident groups and individuals.

Just as with the previous proposals, the new one would require a General Plan Amendment to change the land use designation from industrial to residential and change the zoning to allow multi-family housing on the site. The latest plans include 75 for-sale residential units on 6.08 net acres, with no commercial space. The city would deed the stub end of Niles Boulevard to the developer for use as a private roadway connecting to an interior loop road. The developer would provide a pedestrian access point to the Alameda Creek Trail near the railroad embankment.

What Changed

The original proposal was to build 98 three-story residential units and several mixed-use commercial spaces on the property. The latest proposal reduces the amount of residential to 75 two-story units, and eliminates the mixed-use commercial spaces.

In the original proposal, parking for the commercial spaces was on Niles Boulevard, and there was access to the development from Chase Street in the adjacent residential area. After several revisions, the latest proposal eliminates all parking on Niles Boulevard, and has no vehicle connection to the adjacent neighborhoods.

In the new proposal, plans for a community center have also been dropped, and there are changes to the architecture, open space layout, and other features.

What Didn't Change

Despite these significant changes, there are still several areas of concern regarding traffic, density, massing, and affordability.

The proposed development is still located at one of the worst traffic bottlenecks in Fremont. The narrow, two-lane portion of Niles Boulevard in front of the proposed site makes a sharp turn under the railroad overpass and connects directly to the congested Niles/Mission intersection. All the in and out traffic for the development would have to pass directly through this bottleneck. And because Niles is not near a transit center, most of the residents would choose to drive.

The proposed development would still be denser than nearby residential areas, most of which are single-family detached homes with moderate-sized yards. In contrast, the proposed development would consist of multi-family attached townhouses with no back or side yards. As a result, the development would be more than twice as dense as the adjacent neighborhoods.

Not only would the development be denser, but it would also appear more massive. The revised plan still has long straight rows of attached townhouses. Eight of the thirteen buildings would be five-plexes. Although the buildings are now two-stories, when they are five-plexes, their massing is exaggerated. In this revision, all the garage doors are the same plain design which also adds to the perceived bulk of the buildings.

And finally, the entire development would consist of market-rate housing, priced at the upper end of the affordability range. According to the latest Housing Element report, Fremont has issued building permits for far more new market-rate housing than the goal set by the State of California, and not enough for below-market-rate housing. So if we already have too much high-end housing, then why should the city approve this proposal to get even more?

Approval Process

Because the proposed site is within the Niles Historical Overlay District, it required review and recommendation by the Historical Architectural Review Board (HARB). At the HARB meeting on June 4, the board recommended approval by a vote of 2 to 1. Two of the five HARB members had to recuse themselves because of their prior involvement with the project.

The Planning Commission is tentatively scheduled to review the proposal on Thursday, July 9 and make a recommendation to the City Council.

Final approval of the Niles Gateway Planned District requires a General Plan Amendment to change the land use designation. That is an important decision to be made by the City Council. No date has been set for the City Council meeting.

In the meantime, residents are encouraged to send their comments and questions about the latest Niles Gateway proposal to city staff planner David Wage at dwage@fremont.gov.