

# Developer delivers a pitch for uptown

Supporters say row houses bring urban flair to Fresno.

By George Hostetter  
The Fresno Bee

Reza Assemi is making another big-dollar bet that people will pay good money to live in downtown Fresno.

The 30-year-old developer is pushing plans through City Hall to build a \$10 million housing/commercial project called Row Houses at Fulton Park.

The project calls for 10 row houses to be sold at market rate, 27 market-rate rental lofts and seven "affordable" rental lofts, plus about 33,000 square feet of commercial space. It will be located on what is now largely vacant land near Broadway, Fulton Avenue and Divisadero Street.

The City Council, sitting as the Redevelopment Agency board, unanimously endorsed the project on Sept. 20 and directed agency staff to start assembling the land.

Assemi says he hopes to break ground next year. "There's nothing financially that would kill this project."

Assemi is no stranger to development in this area, sometimes called the cultural arts district, more commonly referred to as uptown. The area is located north of Fulton Mall; it is bordered by H Street on the west, M Street on the east, Divisadero Avenue on the north and Tuolumne Avenue on the south.

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Reza Assemi is a developer who is pushing through Fresno City Hall a housing/commercial project called Row Houses at Fulton Park; he plans to build on a triangular piece of land located at Divisadero and Fulton. Assemi says fast-growing Fresno is becoming home to many people who have lived in cities with thriving downtowns.

DIANA BALDRICA/  
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## Project: Row houses common in East

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Five years ago, Assemi turned the old Red Cross building on Fulton into four apartments of about 850 square feet each.

He recently opened Broadway Studios — 25 artists' studios in a nearly century-old building on Broadway near Tuolumne. And his developer family is turning the former Vagabond Motel site on Broadway and the old armed forces induction center on H Street into more rental lofts.

Some city officials and downtown revitalization advocates see Row Houses at Fulton Park as a tipping point for uptown. They say it will provide the unique combination of housing, retail services, entertainment and word-of-mouth buzz to finally turn uptown into a red-hot destination for consumers.

"This is historic," says Council Member Cynthia Sterling, who represents uptown. "This is the catalyst that will launch everything that comes after it."

Adds Council Member Henry T. Perea: "In the next 24 months, the cultural arts district is going to be a brand-new place."

John Moffat, chairman of the Fresno Revitalization Corp., has been singing about uptown's potential for at least 10 years. Now, he says, "exciting things are happening."

There are several reasons for this en-

thusiasm, he says. The most obvious is the project.

Row houses are common in San Francisco and many large East Coast cities, but not in Fresno. Assemi says each of Fulton Park's row houses will be traditional in style.

That means no front yard, steps leading up to the front door, a long but relatively narrow floor plan, two or three stories, plus a courtyard and a detached garage in back.

The homeowner can add a second level to the garage, perhaps for an in-law residence or an artist's studio, Assemi says. Each house will be about 1,700 square feet.

The rental lofts will be 650 to 950 square feet. Assemi says they will have open floor plans with concrete floors, exposed pipes and ducts and a bedroom or two on the second level plus a bathroom.

It's too early to predict the houses' selling prices or the lofts' monthly rent, Assemi says. But, he adds, Fulton Park will have residences for people of

### More housing in Uptown District

Developer Reza Assemi plans to build a housing and commercial project at the northern end of the Uptown District called Row Houses at Fulton Park.



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all income levels.

A residential project with people of different backgrounds and incomes "is the healthiest way, especially in the downtown area," Assemi says.

Fulton Park's center will feature parking, an amphitheater plus a small park that can be used by the public, Assemi says.

The ground-level commercial space will wrap around Fulton and Sacramento Street. Assemi says cafes, restaurants, boutiques and niche retailers such as health food stores are likely tenants.

Fulton Park will provide an eye-opening greeting to people who enter uptown by traveling south on Fulton, Assemi says. They now see vacant lots.

Fulton Lane, the short, curving road that connects Fulton to Broadway, would disappear. City officials say motorists on Fulton would be able to use Sacramento to get to Broadway.

Fulton Park also will be seen as proof of what a public-private partnership can accomplish for downtown re-

vitalization, city officials say.

Council Member Tom Boyajian, who also is Redevelopment Agency chairman, notes that the deal's financing and land acquisition will require the efforts of City Hall, the RDA, the Housing Authorities of the City and County of Fresno and the Interagency Housing Task Force.

This is in addition to Assemi's work. This kind of collaboration, Boyajian says, will produce downtown projects "that people never thought would happen."

The RDA has budgeted \$750,000 for the project in its 2005-06 budget and the Housing Assistance Corp., a nonprofit affiliate of the Housing Authority, will provide a \$1.4 million loan, according to an RDA report.

RDA Executive Director Marlene Murphey told the council on Sept. 20 that the developer will come up with about \$7.4 million worth of equity and private financing.

Assemi says fast-growing Fresno is becoming home to many people who have lived in cities with thriving downtowns. He calls it "urban living," adding that Fresno has a beautiful downtown and an uptown district with immense potential.

Says Assemi: "Why not have urban living here?"

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