

# Marin Independent Journal

April 1, 2008

## Developer shops restaurant, hotel for Fireman's Fund site in Novato

### Joe Wolfcale

A San Diego development company that owns the Fireman's Fund Insurance Co. headquarters in Novato is proposing an ambitious plan for a restaurant and 100-room hotel, three new parking structures and more office space on the 65-acre site.

Officials with American Assets Inc., which purchased the property last year for \$312 million, have been quietly meeting with city officials, community members and others over the past few weeks to float their plan and solicit feedback.

No formal development application has been submitted to the city, said David Hyams, a spokesman for the developer.

He said the proposal could create some additional open space on the site, increasing the open area from 29 to 40 acres. Also, the developer plans to include a community center of some kind, which is under discussion.

"The plan is to create a true mixed-used development," Hyams said.

American Assets officials are reviewing the community comments they have received and could return with a revised version of the proposed project later this spring, Hyams said.

American Assets leases the property to Fireman's Fund, which has about 1,050 full-time employees and 300 to 500 part-time staffers, mostly working in two buildings, said Janet Ruiz, a company spokeswoman.

Officials with the insurance giant haven't formally taken a position on American Assets' proposal and are intent on staying at the site.



Fireman's Fund is seen in Novato. (Special to the IJ/Douglas Zimmerman)

"Regardless of changes to the campus, Fireman's Fund intends to remain in our Novato location for many years," Ruiz said.

Any proposed use changes there would require American Assets to apply for rezoning to make it consistent with the precise development plan and the city's general plan. The site is zoned for business and professional office use under the city's general plan.

Novato Mayor Pat Eklund said she met with officials from American Assets and voiced her concerns about their project, including the potential for increased traffic on San Marin Drive and Redwood Boulevard, and the density of the project.

"This is the gateway to Novato and a very sensitive site," Eklund said. "I think it's a bit overly ambitious. There were a lot of generalities and not a lot of specifics."

Novato City Manager Dan Keen said he is cautiously optimistic.

"It seems like a good place for the kinds of uses they're proposing," Keen said. "There's room for an additional hotel, and if upgrading the corporate campus helps keeping it occupied, this is one of the sites that makes sense."

Former Novato mayor Susan Stompe met with American Assets Chief Executive Officer John Chamberlain and Councilwoman Carole Dillon-Knutson. Stompe, mayor in 1981 and 1987, said she was concerned about the prospect of changing the character of the site to a more industrial look.

"I supported the campus-type atmosphere for the entrance to the San Marin community initially, but I think this plan would change it considerably," Stompe said. "I have some concerns about traffic impacts on San Marin Drive and, right now, I'm thinking more negatively than positively."

The presentation was also made to several members of the Novato Unified School District board, including trustees Ross Millerick, Derek Knell and Cindi Clinton. Millerick said he also has concerns about traffic, but he says the city should have an active and vital business community.

### THE SITE

Designed by the architecture firm Gensler & Associates, the campus-style complex features three four-story buildings and provides more than 710,000 square feet of office space.

The buildings are at:

- 777 San Marin Drive, built in 1983, with 255,472 square feet.

- 775 San Marin Drive, built in 1993, with 227,429 square feet.

- 779 San Marin Drive, built in 1993, 227,429 square feet.