

# Fairbanks City Council balks at borough's downtown proposal

by Joshua Armstrong / [jarmstrong@newsminer.com](mailto:jarmstrong@newsminer.com)

01.30.10 - 02:52 am

FAIRBANKS — A borough proposal to create new downtown development standards is meeting some opposition in the Fairbanks City Council.

The proposed Fairbanks North Star Borough ordinance seeks to create two new zoning classes — a retail hot spot district and a downtown supporting commercial district.

The ordinance was sent a week ago to the borough Planning Commission and the Fairbanks City Council for their review and recommendations.

Some council members balked at what they see as increased regulation, including a stipulation that business offices cannot be at ground level in the retail hot spot.

Council members Chad Roberts, Jerry Cleworth and Vivian Stiver each said tightening restrictions is not the best way to promote more business downtown.

“I don’t think that the smartest thing to do right now with the economic downturn is to add a whole new layer of regulation,” Cleworth said, adding that enforcement of the codes is an issue that hasn’t been addressed.

Roberts suggested incentives, such as a point system to lure government-leased offices, as other ways to revitalize downtown.

Borough community planning director Bernardo Hernandez said the retail hot spot would be a “very small” portion of downtown, and the majority of the area still would allow ground-level offices.

The intention is not to force properties to rezone immediately, Hernandez said. The ordinance merely creates the classes as tools for later use.

As for the retail hot spot, the reasoning behind having only shops and restaurants at ground level is to create a pedestrian-friendly marketplace.

“We want to provide for more comfort for pedestrians and give them more room, more windows to look into and look out of,” Hernandez said.

David van den Berg, executive director of the Downtown Association of Fairbanks, said he has spoken to many downtown landowners about the ordinance and heard no opposition.

“A rezone would proceed with the participation and concurrence of the landowners,” he said. “The new zone defines and protects and upholds the investment climate.”

Councilman Bernard Gatewood said he is behind the spirit of the ordinance.

“I think that the changes they are suggesting are good, but I’m not sure I want to adopt each and every one of them,” he said. “I’ll go through it with a fine-toothed comb. ... I doubt we’re going to send it back with a blank check.”

Fairbanks Mayor Terry Strle wrote in an e-mail that she appreciates that the borough asked for the city’s opinion in the matter, but she has some questions, too.

“I am supportive of the revitalization, but the devil is in the details,” she wrote. “The development standards may be too restrictive and there is always the question of enforcement, so that is where I see the city’s concerns.”

Phone messages left for council members John Eberhart and Emily Bratcher received no response by Friday afternoon.

Contact staff writer Joshua Armstrong at 459-7523.

© newsminer.com 2010