

City of Fairbanks, borough to review proposed downtown zoning ordinances

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FAIRBANKS — New zoning categories proposed by Vision Fairbanks will be scrutinized at city and borough meetings next week.

The downtown revitalization project is seeking to create two zoning classes for the downtown area, which would be created by a borough ordinance.

On Monday night, the Fairbanks City Council is scheduled to vote on a resolution supporting the ordinance but requesting two amendments. On Tuesday afternoon, the borough planning commission will host a public hearing on the ordinance.

One zoning classification — downtown supporting commercial district — would remove 30 types of building uses including communication towers, liquor stores and taxidermist offices.

It would add 15 uses including barber shops, art galleries and laundromats.

The other zoning type would exist inside the downtown supporting commercial district. The retail hot spot district is intended to promote ground-level restaurants and retail stores.

It would prohibit ground-level professional offices and 25 additional uses.

The idea is to create a straight line of pedestrian-friendly stores and restaurants with nothing unappealing to walk past such as a misty car wash, Downtown Fairbanks executive director David van den Berg said.

Van den Berg said he has spoken to 45 of 58 land owners in Vision Fairbanks' proposed area to explain the zoning plan.

"Our planning is a way to say, 'We're going to protect your investment,'" van den Berg said.

Vision Fairbanks aims to apply these zones to an area bordered by Barnette Street to the west, First Avenue to the north, Lacey Street to the east and Seventh Avenue to the south. A panhandle of property along First Avenue to Cowles Street also is part of the plan.

The land is currently zoned as a central business district.

Existing businesses would be grandfathered in through borough regulations and not subject to any new zoning, van den Berg said.

The ordinance would simply create the zone classifications, not apply them anywhere.

Monday's proposed city resolution, sponsored by Mayor Terry Strle and Councilwoman Emily Bratcher, supports the ordinance but redoubles concerns that the retail hot spot's limits on ground-level use and both zones' restrictions on window tinting.

Bratcher, a former member of the planning commission, said filling space at the ground floor with any business would be beneficial to downtown.

"Right now, we're in this progressive stage where an active first floor, whether it's office or retail, is better than an empty space," Bratcher said.

Because retail stores would be willing to pay a premium for ground-level space, offices would naturally move elsewhere for economic reasons, she said.

Patience and adaptability in the process will be key as Vision Fairbanks begins to take root, Bratcher added.

"The most critical thing for this plan is for us to remember that it's going to evolve and things are going to change over the years," she said.

The resolution notes that the ground-floor restriction on offices would be more acceptable if the hot spot were designated to a limited area.

The retail hot spot has no defined boundaries, but Vision Fairbanks documents identified the property along Cushman Street between Fourth through Seventh avenues as an optimal place.

Those blocks have open spaces, such as the massive Seventh Avenue parking lot, that are an little-used part of the city's signature street, van den Berg said.