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Fairbanks borough assembly debates new zoning categories

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FAIRBANKS — The heated topic of zoning has resurfaced at the borough.

The Fairbanks North Star Borough Assembly will vote on new zoning categories and standards at its meeting next Thursday.

A presentation at a work session yesterday revealed clashing views on new zones, which would be created by the ordinance but not applied to any property.

“This does not rezone any property at all. It just puts two new tools in the zoning code,” said Bernardo Hernandez, director of community planning for the borough.

The ordinance would create two new zones, the “downtown supporting commercial district” and “retail hot spot district.”

The new zones will help implement Vision Fairbanks, a revitalization plan that has been led by the Downtown Association since 2006 and was adopted into the borough’s comprehensive plan in 2008.

The zones come with guidelines for building facades, setbacks and window transparency.

“This tries to create a pedestrian friendly environment for downtown. People feel safe when the buildings are close to the property lines, when there are windows people can see through,” Hernandez said.

The zones are available for property owners and also could be used in a rezone initiated by the mayor or the Borough Assembly — though that has rarely occurred.

The zones may not be used right away but would help downtown become more vibrant in the next few decades, Hernandez said.

Assemblymember Michael Dukes said instead of focusing on the pedestrian experience, zoning should encourage more parking.

“I don’t know a whole lot of pedestrians at 40 below that are excited about having to walk 20 blocks,” he said. “I’m questioning the overall idea here of trying to force people into a mold which I don’t know if, necessarily, in an arctic climate would fit us.”

Assemblyman Karl Kassel said he did not see the zones as imposing on people.

“We’re modifying the code to create options,” he said. “I don’t feel that we’re forcing this or mandating anything here.”

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