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Fairbanks Borough Assembly says no to plan to boost downtown zoning

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FAIRBANKS — The Fairbanks North Star Borough Assembly voted down new zoning standards aimed at revitalizing downtown.

The ordinance failed after a 4-4 tie Thursday night, with assembly members Michael Dukes, Natalie Howard, Matt Want and Joe Blanchard voting against it. The debate showed colliding views on planning for downtown.

Want said the zones were far too exclusive and that any business was better than no business.

“I’m worried, because of these building requirements, that will limit the size and scope of businesses that will go downtown,” Want said. “I think it will be difficult for a mom and pop operation to build to these standards.”

Nearly 20 residents — mostly business owners — testified in favor of the ordinance, saying it would attract investment and customers. About 10 spoke against it because it was too restrictive and could backfire.

The ordinance proposed creating two new zones, the “downtown supporting commercial district” and “retail hot spot district.” They are part of Vision Fairbanks, a plan by the Downtown Association to spur investment downtown by creating a pedestrian friendly atmosphere.

The zones encouraged a straight line of retail establishments like restaurants, retail stores and art galleries instead of car washes and storage garages. They set standards for building facades, setbacks and window transparency.

The zones were popular among business owners, who said they would protect their property value by assuring that neighbors have similar retail appeal. For instance, you couldn’t build a big parking lot or add heavily tinted windows in the zones.

Tim Cerny, owner of the Bridgewater Hotel, said he would invest in the new zones if they became available.

“This is but one small step in the process of rebuilding our small downtown. It has taken decades of neglect to get where we are now and will likely take decades to correct it,” he said.

The support of business owners convinced half the assembly.

“I think downtown business owners deserve the chance to do their own future. This gives them that opportunity,” said Assemblywoman Diane Hutchison.

Some residents and assembly members said the restrictions would hinder rather than help development.

The new zones don't affect anybody unless there's a rezone. Rezones can be initiated by the borough mayor, the Borough Assembly or a resident, and would have to be approved by the assembly. In the event of a rezone, new property owners or tenants would have to conform with new zoning rules while existing ones would be grandfathered in.

Resident Mike Prax complimented the design standards but said they shouldn't be put into code.

"It isn't the borough's job to tell the folks downtown how to run their property," he said. "(Business owners) have an association. They should go talk to their neighbors."

Assemblywoman Howard agreed that the standards should be optional, not mandated by the borough.

"This is a way for a certain group of people to use government force to impose restrictions on their neighbors."

Air quality zones

The Borough Assembly expanded air quality regulations to add greater protection for vulnerable residents like children and the elderly Thursday night.

"This ordinance attempts to protect the health of borough residents as best we can," said Assemblywoman Nadine Winters, who sponsored the it along with assembly members Diane Hutchison and Joseph Blanchard

Assembly members Natalie Howard and Michael Dukes voted against the ordinance.

The ordinance draws a half-mile buffer around schools as well as state-licensed day care, assisted living and medical facilities. These zones, like other areas with particulate pollution, cannot burn specific fuels or install appliances like hydronic heaters. Fines for burning prohibited fuel double to \$60 in these zones

The change also adds a new material to the list of prohibited fuels — anything not intended for use by the manufacturer of the appliance. It makes an exception for Healy coal, however.

During public testimony, several residents said the air quality zones were a good idea but the exception for coal was not.

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