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Assemblyman to create alternative ordinance aimed at downtown revitalization

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FAIRBANKS — Vision Fairbanks boosters may still get help from the Fairbanks North Star Borough in their effort to spruce up downtown.

Assemblyman Joe Blanchard wants to create an ordinance that is less restrictive than a recently rejected downtown zoning proposal but would still boost economic development.

“That’s the biggest worry we have with Vision Fairbanks, is them trying to cut out particular businesses from a model,” he said.

Last week, Blanchard voted against creating new zoning types for downtown (along with assembly members Michael Dukes, Natalie Howard and Matt Want). He said his differences with the plan were too big to rectify with amendments.

His plan, which is only an idea right now, would involve the Downtown Association, the city of Fairbanks and the borough planning department, Blanchard said.

It would differ with the Vision Fairbanks zoning proposal in several key ways.

Blanchard’s plan would list the types of businesses that are not permitted rather than the types that are, unlike typical local and national zoning laws.

“I know we traditionally don’t do zoning that way, but I think we want this downtown zone to be as inclusive as possible,” he said. “If you want to build a car wash downtown, people might come downtown to get their car washed.”

The planning department said it’s possible to write such an ordinance but will be more difficult.

The goal of zoning is to encourage compatible uses, like commercial, residential and office buildings, that interact well, said Bernardo Hernandez, director of community planning for the borough. It’s easier to compile a list of things that work well together than things that don’t.

“It’s very difficult to exclude all those things you couldn’t even think of that wouldn’t be compatible ... like dog teams, nuclear power plants,” he said.

The Downtown Association is doubtful of the ordinance for that reason.

“It’s a wild card,” said David van den Berg, executive director of the Downtown Association. “It brings into question if the main effort is to reform the zoning code or revitalize downtown.”

Blanchard also wants to allow parking lots to be developed in the core area.

“My vision is if somebody wants to put a parking lot in, they should be able to. I think businesses will surround that lot,” Blanchard said.

The last ordinance stated landowners could provide parking, but not as the primary use, in the small inner core of downtown if the zone were applied there. You could build parking lots in the outer zone and have street parking throughout, Hernandez said.

“Planners generally say having parking lots in a retail hot spot really breaks up the form of a retail environment. You want to see one business after another business as you walk by and not a vacant parking lot,” he said.

Van den Berg said on-street parking would be a better solution than new lots.

“They’ve got more loading zone than they need. Give up some loading zone for on-street parking,” he said.

Lastly, Blanchard would scale back the structural standards, which put limits on window percentages, window transparency, building entrances and other features for new buildings. All existing structures and uses would be grandfathered in.

“We’re not going to be as restrictive with all the structural stuff. If you want to do that in your covenant, your deed restrictions, you’re more than welcome,” he said.

Blanchard expects the plan will come before the Borough Assembly in June.

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