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City boards look at future of land use

Commissions agree to limit high-density development

By Geri Throne

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

WINTER PARK — The city may not be able to do much to save local gas stations and neighborhood supermarkets, but it can try to limit massive office projects, city officials agree.

A rare joint meeting between the planning and zoning commission and the city commission on Wednesday was billed as a brainstorming session to look at what direction city land-use is headed.

Few conclusions were reached at the meeting. Members of the two boards disagreed on whether growth is inevitable and if tall buildings are bad for the city.

But they agreed on one main point: The city should do something to limit the intensity of development; that is, projects that bring high-density construction to this low-density community.

The next step is a neighborhood-by-neighborhood review of the comprehensive land-use plan, a document used to regulate how the city develops.

At the same time, city Planner Jeff Briggs will propose immediate changes in zoning policies that will help the city limit intensity of projects. Briggs said he wanted to move quickly because developers of at least 12 office projects will seek city approval in June, when sewage capacity becomes available.

Possible policy changes include restric-

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tions on off-site leased parking, parking under a building and building height in certain neighborhoods, he said. Because the city requires a certain number of parking places depending on the type of development, changes in those regulations could help limit the size of projects.

At the Wednesday meeting, members of the two boards aired sometimes varying philosophies about land use.

Members of the planning and zoning commission, an appointed city board, talked about the rights of landowners. Several suggested that an attractive office building is a better alternative than blight or a high-traffic commercial business.

City commissioners talked about complaints from residents about large buildings, traffic and parking. They repeated citizen concerns about the impact of such projects as a three-story building on Fairbanks Avenue and architect Oru Bose's highrise office building under construction at Fairbanks and U.S. Highway 17-92.

Later, Briggs observed that members of the two bodies generally have different philosophies on redevelopment. Planning and zoning commission members are "pro-growth to the extent that they encourage the redevelopment of the city in a beneficial manner, and I don't think the city commission goes quite that far."

Mayor Hope Strong Jr., who called the meeting, spoke Wednesday against new development that is replacing downtown services such as the Texaco gas station on New York Avenue.

"People are used to a small-town atmosphere where they can go to the post office and get gas at the same time," Strong said.

Planning board chairman William Doster, an Orlando attorney, questioned to what extent the city should dictate how people use their property. Offices locate where the demand is, he said.

"Everyone wants to zone somebody else's property, mayor. There's no question about that," Doster said.

Members of the appointed planning and zoning commission said they see change as expected in a city that sits in the heart of booming Central Florida, and tall buildings as "not necessarily a bad thing." Corridors leading

into the city, such as U.S. 17-92, are not suited for homes, they said.

The city may not want growth, but "it's inevitable," said board member Robert Koch, suggesting that the city look at the quality and scale of the growth rather than at building heights. Koch, an architect, has proposed a four-story office building at Howell Branch Road and Temple Trail.

Commissioner Dave Johnston argued that offices are a less intense use of land than retail stores.

"I think offices help preserve Winter Park as a residential community," said Johnston, agreeing that the city needs to look at the intensity of development.

Commissioner Gary Brewer said the city should control the intensity of development but should not be too restrictive. Without growth, he said, "we stagnate."

Members of both boards also agreed the city should look closely at several sensitive areas subject to pressure by developers:

- West Winter Park, a predominantly black residential area that one planning board member called "red hot" for change. City Manager David Harden said a city decision in the 1970s to protect the residential character of the west side finally stopped a decline in population there that started in 1930. But some planning board members questioned whether west-side residents still favored that residential philosophy.

- Holt Avenue, a well-traveled residential street west of Rollins College.

- Residential neighborhoods south of Fairbanks Avenue and east of U.S. 17-92, where homes could be "worth a fortune" if zoning were changed to commercial or office, said planning board member Larry Divine.

- A large undeveloped tract east of Lake Virginia owned by the Winter Park Land Co. Johnston warned the character of the city would be changed if all the property were put on the market at one time.

- Winter Park Junior High School. Orange County school officials have mentioned the closing of the school as one option in a countywide redistricting proposal.

About 20 citizens attended the meeting. One, John Twachtman, said residents have become cynical about city governing bodies.

"Everyone says you can't stop progress and I say that's a copout," said Twachtman, newly elected president of the Winter Park Historical Association.