

# Neighborhood speaks out against rezoning

My first question to you - Are you also counting the days until March? Thirty-nine days. You probably can also do without these 11-degree nights.

We remain in The Twilight Zone - for how long, we do not know. The City Council continues as usual though with issues that never change over the years.

This coming Monday night is a big night in the City Council for the important topic of neighborhoods.

The major zoning question is the Western Road rezoning of 2302 and 2324 West 8th Avenue and 802 South Western Road - simplified, this is the area centering around 8th Avenue and South Western Road. This rezoning has already been through the Planning Commission and the City Council for one round.

For the first round, the Planning Commission voted for rezoning to commercial shopping by with four voting yes and one abstaining. When the proposed rezoning went to the City Council, a turnaround took place. The City Council sent the proposed rezoning back to the Planning Commission for another hearing.

On Dec. 21 at the Planning Commission meeting, the City's Senior Planner announced the developer had changed the rezoning request from commercial shopping to office zoning. Office zoning would be considered to be a buffer to the residential area.

Three people spoke in favor of the new proposal - Josh Powers, the engineer for the developer; Jason Hanson, the developer; and Sherri Buntin, the developer's rental property manager.

Powers said the change to office was made as it would be less intrusive to the neighbors. He stated the development could not increase the drainage, and the property values of the surrounding homes would not decrease. He described Western as a thoroughfare so "something has gotta change." He said traffic increase would be low as the offices would be for 8 to 5 businesses. He added the development would not be taking away from the neighborhood. Eighth would be made better and wider - and "all the good stuff."

Jason Hanson spoke about the original reason for buying the house at 2302 West 8th Avenue was to have an office on that land for his wife's chiropractic clinic. Hanson spoke about driving on Western from his home in southwest Stillwater. He commented, "We are part of the neighborhood. We want it to be nice." He added there are people in the neighborhood who are very excited about his plan although they probably would not be speak-



Julie Couch

ing at the hearing. Buntin described managing the two rental properties for the Hanson family. She went to great lengths to describe the problems with the home at the NW corner of 8th and Western. She said the home built in the 1920s had seen "better days."

A footnote about the house - when we moved to Stillwater in 1971, George and Monica Berry lived in that house. George, an avid tennis player, had parties for the tennis group. We attended one of those gatherings - at that time, that was a lovely home. I am guessing it still could be a lovely home for someone who wanted to do restoration.

Buntin noted the other house at 2324 W 8th would be relocated so that would not count as the loss of Stillwater housing.

Then those residents in opposition spoke. Eight spoke against the plan.

Betsy Shewalter has lived in her home on 8th for 41 years. She said the rezoning would change the character of her neighborhood. With changes over the years, she now has Wicklow as her neighbor on the north and Townhomes as her neighbor on the west. She does not want an office on the east with her house being the only one left. She thought rezoning would create two environments, two completely different entities.

Dinah Cox who lives on Devon spoke about the neighborhood as a hidden gem. She described their home as having beautiful scenery, wildlife, an abundance of trees and the kindness of neighbors.

Brian Correa lives on 8th next to the land proposed for rezoning for the large office building. He stated the lots in question as rezoned would amount to 80% the size of Wicklow. This rezoning would extend 400 feet into the residential area.

Steve Trompler who lives on Wicklow mentioned the current Comprehensive Plan's emphasis on the importance of the stability of neighborhoods and maintaining the established character of those neighborhoods. The importance of trees to the City is also emphasized.

Adam Naff who lives in the Westwood area wanted the Planning Commissioners to know this is an important issue for other Stillwater residents - not just that neighborhood.

Michelle Charles talked about her home on 9th. After the rental property manager had talked

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Steve Hallgren,  
Planning Commissioner

about the poor condition of the 8th and Western property, Charles said their home had been in poor condition but they had repaired and restored it until it should be good for another 50 to 60 years. She continued that she understands that times change, but she spoke against the rezoning mentioning problems with flooding and traffic.

John Mitchell who has property on South Western commented about the preservation of the beauty of the neighborhood.

John te Velde who lives on 8th talked about the areas in Stillwater where office and commercial development can take place and not damage a neighborhood.

A young woman whose name I missed brought her young daughter with her to speak. She commented that she had never spoken at a City meeting. She told about their young family living in the neighborhood on Ridge and how important this neighborhood is for affordable housing.

The Commissioners discussed the issue before voting 3-1 to deny the rezoning request. Chair Jana Phillips talked about the importance of neighborhoods. Vice-Chair Mike Shanahan talked about walking the area.

Steve Hallgren asked the question that should be asked in any of these rezoning proposals. "Why did you buy property for an office or commercial purposes when it is residentially zoned?"

Why should developers be able to rezone property so they can make money while a neighborhood suffers? As John te Velde pointed out, there is plenty of property in Stillwater available for development. Chair Phillips emphasized the importance of a strong neighborhood.

These people speaking at that hearing are a great example of a strong neighborhood. Strong neighborhoods make the City a better place for all residents. The 2030 Comprehensive Plan correctly emphasizes the importance of maintaining the established character of existing neighborhoods.

The Western Road neighborhood is a beautiful neighborhood. The Planning Commission made the right decision by standing up for neighborhoods. The City Council should follow their guidance on Monday night.

Last thoughts - Think Spring!