

City zoning could get makeover



February 10, 2014

By Chris Stevens/The Daily Item

A developer could open a tannery today on Boston Street but would need a special permit for nearly anything else, according to the city's 88-year-old zoning ordinances.

"My fear is one day we'll get a tannery because they can do that by right," said City Council Daniel Cahill. "By right" means that the project falls within the existing zoning rules and cannot be prohibited.

Cahill told the crowd at a recent Lynn Area Chamber of Commerce dinner that he's asked Councilor at large Brendan Crighton, who serves as chairman of the Ordinance Subcommittee, to take on the daunting task of reviewing, reworking and in some cases rewriting the city's zoning ordinances.

Lynn Area Chamber of Commerce Chairman Taso Nickolakopoulos called the zoning laws, which were approved in 1926, the city's top economic impediment.

"Unless someone drove here in a horse and buggy I would say they're a little out of date," he said, speaking at the same chamber dinner.

Mayor Judith Flanagan Kennedy has called the rules inflexible. Inspectional Services Director Michael Donovan said the only updates took place when the downtown was rezoned in 2003 and the waterfront in 2010 but everything else is essentially the same as in the 1920s.

"There have been a lot of changes but nothing has been codified under one document," Cahill said.

That means if Donovan needs to look up a zoning question he has to search through any number of documents to make sure he's giving the most up-to-date answer, Cahill said.

Crighton said the key will be to bring in "all the stakeholders" such as ISD, the Economic Development and Industrial Corporation, the Metropolitan Area Planning Council that is putting together its own list of strategies for creating a more prosperous downtown, as well as local businesses and residents.

"People think zoning means business, but we've experienced some residential projects where we're seeing multi-family homes built in neighborhoods that are mostly single-family homes," Cahill said. "But they're zoned for multi-family."

He said one of the goals in the revamp is to ensure that the character of individual neighborhoods is maintained.

"We want thoughtful growth," he said.

Crighton said some of the work will be relatively straightforward, updating ordinances to bring them in line with public safety laws and accepted practices. Other parts of the job, such as looking at the special permitting process, will likely take some time, he said.

"And we might not reach a consensus and that's OK. At least we'll have starting point for the next time," he said.

No one is expecting the changes to happen overnight, either. Crighton said he has no particular timeline

planned, but Cahill said he sees it as a two-year project.

The project has the potential for getting bogged down as well because Crighton has a lot on his plate. The newlywed councilor has a full-time job and recently announced plans to run for the 11th District state representative seat soon to be vacated by Steven Walsh. Crighton said he will rely on his colleague Darren Cyr, who previously chaired the Ordinance Committee, and other councilors who have worked over the years trying to make sense of the outdated document.

He can also rely on an intern. Cahill said A.J. Capano is halfway through law school and has a passion for zoning.

“And he comes at a very cheap cost — free,” he added.

He said Capano is excited to help with research and anything else the committee needs him to do.

“We’re going to try and do this and if we can’t all agree at the end of the day at least we’ll all will have had the chance to get in a room and see what the city should look like,” Cahill said.

Chris Stevens can be reached at cstevens@itemlive.com.

[Back to News](#)