



Aberdeen Votes In Multi-Family Ban

BY MARY GRIFFIN: STAFF WRITER

The Aberdeen town commissioners voted 3-2 Monday night to adopt a nine-month moratorium on multi-family housing units and duplexes.

The ban will take effect immediately but would not halt building permit applications already submitted to the town's Planning Department.

Town Planning Director Kathy Liles said during the Town Board's last work session that since moratorium discussions began, 14 applications for multi-family housing units have been submitted, while just two have been submitted for single-family units.

The town's zoning code defines most multi-family housing -- including apartments, condominiums and town homes, but not duplexes -- as a "building arranged to be occupied by three or more families." Duplexes are defined as "a building arranged or designed to be occupied by two families that must have the physical appearance of a single-family dwelling from the front."

However, for the

purpose of the proposed ordinance, the term multi-family housing will apply to apartments, condominiums, townhouses and duplexes.

Liles presented three possible options for the board to consider before voting. It could adopt the moratorium, although it isn't supported by developers or the town's Planning Board; it could not adopt a moratorium but move forward with the assistance of an outside consulting firm to address zoning districts; or it could allow the building of multi-family units and duplexes in only certain zones until the town has amended its zoning districts.

"Essentially, that is a moratorium," Liles said.

Liles presented possible zones -- R6, R10 and B3 -- for this option. If all three were excluded from a moratorium, more than 2,500 new units could be built within those zones.

Mayor Betsy Mofield noted that since multi-family units generate more tax revenue, they also generate more income for developers.

"Although land within those zones was already developed, nothing would stop a developer from buying the land, leveling the existing buildings and building more multi-family dwellings," she said. "Some of our oldest houses are located in R6, along Main Street, Bethesda Road and Poplar and Page Streets. Those would be the homes we'd be placing in jeopardy. This needs our serious consideration when you include any multi-family units in those areas. This is a hard decision for the board to make because there are reasonable arguments on both sides."

Commissioner Robbie Farrell pointed out that a moratorium, if adopted, would give the board time to consider options like this.

Liles said the third option is only a stop-gap measure and would probably have to be revisited.

Ferrell replied, "Then I don't think that's the answer."

Commissioner Jim Thomas made a motion to adopt a resolution calling for a nine-month moratorium, pointing to statistics that support it.

"Honestly, we've discussed it, and we've already exceeded the national average on multi-family units," he said. "This will give us time to pursue other options that (Liles) pointed out."

The number of multi-family housing units has increased over the last 28 years. The 1990 U.S. Census reported that 348 of the 1,239 dwelling units in Aberdeen were multi-family units, or 28.1 percent. By 2000, that number had grown to 642 of the 1,655 dwellings in town, or 38.1 percent.

That percentage exceeds the national average of 33.8 percent. Since then, the town has approved an additional 508 units of multi-family housing.

Commissioner Donna Shannon seconded Thomas' motion.

"I strongly feel that we have to protect the character of our neighborhoods and the quality of life not just for current residents, but for future ones as well," she said. "I was comfortable with a compromise at first, but the more I look at it, the more concerned I am."

Pat Ann McMurray and Walter Wright, the two commissioners who cast the dissenting votes, favored the "stop-gap" measure.

"The word has a harsher effect than if we take another approach," McMurray said. "We want a mixed community and mixed housing for different needs."

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