

**City of Falcon Heights  
Planning Commission Minutes  
February 28, 2012**

**PRESENT:** Commissioners Black, Brown, Gustafson, Minns, Noble, Wartick, Council Member Harris, Staff Liaison Jones.

**ABSENT:** Commissioners Fite and Minns

The meeting was called to order at 7:02 p.m. by the 2011 Chair, Commissioner Black, who noted that a quorum was present.

The minutes for January, 2012, were approved by acclamation with one correction. The extraneous words “elected Commissioners” were struck out of the sentence on chair and vice-chair election.

Staff Liaison Jones introduced new City Administrator Bart Fischer, who was attending the Planning Commission for the first time.

**Public Hearing on the proposed front porch amendment**

Ms. Jones introduced the topic by giving the audience some background on the terms and concepts addressed in the ordinance. Front porches had gone out of fashion in home architecture during the period when most Falcon Heights homes were built. Styles have changed again, and now people approach the city about adding front porches or covered entries. However, most houses were built up very close to the front setback line, which means that any functional front entry or porch would have to encroach into the front setback. The city code allows certain specific encroachments into the setback, but front porches are not included. Jones explained that front porches are not prohibited. They can be built behind the setback line. They’re simply not included among the things that are allowed to extend into the front setback area. The proposed code amendment would add certain kinds of front porches as allowed encroachments.

Commissioner Black reminded the audience that the City Council will make the final decision; the Commission makes a recommendation to the Council. He stated that the Commission had several workshops in 2011 to review research on ordinances in other cities regarding front porches.

Commissioner Black opened the hearing. Three people were in attendance: Melanie Leehy of 1800 Larpenteur; Kris Grangaard of 1727 Simpson; Diane Ross of 1825 Simpson. All three spoke enthusiastically in favor of allowing front porch encroachments. They cited the social benefits to neighborhoods and the added value to homes.

In response to a question from Ms. Grangaard regarding uncovered porches or decks in front of houses, Jones said that those are handled separately in our code and require a variance to encroach into the front setback. This seems to be a hold over from a time when the standards for granting a variance were much less strict, so this is something the Commission should

look at fixing. However, decks are not under consideration in the amendment under consideration.

### **Planning Commission Discussion**

Commissioner Black opened the discussion by pointing out that are two conflicting goals in operation here. He feels commissioners agree that porches are a good thing, but front setbacks exist for a reason. Allowing these structures could make our streetscapes narrower visually, in effect extending houses forward. This would definitely have an impact on the neighborhood that might not be so positive.

Commissioner Wartick expressed a similar concern about the impact on the streetscape. He raised an additional concern that front porches might be “filled in” as in many St. Paul neighborhoods, becoming an additional closed room at the front of the house.

Commissioner Brown said he favors the idea of front porches. He does not think six feet would be enough of an encroachment to have a negative impact on the streetscape. Views are already obscured by trees and bushes. If porches are required to remain open, not walled in, they can be an inviting amenity.

Commissioner Noble asked how many houses are up close to the front setback line. Jones said she didn't have an exact count but a look at aerial photos shows that “most” homes are lined up along the setback line. They might be back a few feet but not far enough to add anything “useful” between the existing front wall and the setback line. There are a few houses that are farther back, particularly on some of the very deep lots.

Commissioners then got into an involved discussion regarding whether or not the proposed amendment grants more scope for encroachment into side setback than the Commission perhaps intended. Commissioner Brown said he would prefer that the amendment not allow any encroachment into side setbacks.

Commissioner Wartick said he does not favor allowing extension of houses into the setback and he feels this is what will happen with this amendment. He felt covered entries could be allowed but the amendment as proposed is too broad. Commissioners Noble and Gustafson and Council Member Harris also expressed reservations with the language as stated.

As discussion continued, Commissioners realized that they were returning to questions that they should have addressed in the workshop process. Noble moved that the matter be tabled to allow the Commission more time to work on these questions. The motion passed.

Jones reminded the Commission and the audience that the required public hearing has been held and another public hearing would not be required as long as the Commission does not end up recommending something substantially different. Several Commissioners expressed thanks to the people from the community who showed up to speak at the hearing.

**Information and Announcements:**

Council Member Harris announced the upcoming women's safety workshop at City Hall. She said she attended a similar workshop and what she learned allowed her to avoid an assault. Jones reminded people to call and register.

City Administrator Fischer said he had enjoyed meeting the Planning Commission.

**ADJOURNMENT:** The meeting was adjourned at 8:24 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Deborah Jones, Staff Liaison