

**City of Falcon Heights Planning Commission
Minutes of the Planning Commission Workshop
May 22, 2012**

Commissioners met for the workshop at 7:00 p.m. Present were Commissioners Gustafson, Wartick, Noble, Fite and Minns. Also present were Council Member Harris and Zoning and Planning Director Jones.

1. Proposed updates to off-street parking ordinance.

Staff presented information on an ordinance amendment proposed for public hearing next month. The ordinance would amend certain elements of Falcon Heights zoning chapter, reducing the required minimum size of parking spaces in off-street parking lots and allowing the City Engineer to grant some design flexibility in the design of curbing at the edge of parking lot pavements. The changes are consistent with “best practices” recommended by the Metropolitan Council.

The reason for these changes is to bring Falcon Heights code “into the 21st century” with respect to off-street parking standards. Cars are smaller now than when these ordinances were first written, and parking lot design standards have been changed to reflect this. More critically, it has become a high priority for cities to reduce storm water runoff by reducing impervious paved surface. Bringing Falcon Heights parking lot requirements up to date has been on the horizon since the comprehensive plan was in the works, but other matters have taken priority.

Now the matter has taken on some urgency because one of the largest parking lots in the city, the west lot for TIES, is due for needed renovation and the owner has obtained a significant grant to get this work done. The design consultants have presented a plan consistent with present design standards, but variances will be needed if the city code is not updated. Staff would like to update the code now in order to avoid variances that would soon become moot.

Commissioners were provided with the Metropolitan Council’s best practice publication on the topic and additional parking lot design literature. The code amendment draft was not yet prepared at the time of the workshop.

Some Commissioners were concerned that this change is being done “for TIES”. Staff assured Commissioners that the ordinance change is city-wide and will apply to all parking lots. It has been on the “to do” list for several years but not a high priority. The TIES plan is a good reason to do it now. Otherwise, they will need to apply for variances or conform to requirements that are out of date and would soon be changed anyway.

Commissioners asked if other commercial property owners can reconfigure their parking lots after the code is amended. Jones said yes, certainly. In most cases this would not result in a significant increase in parking stalls because most lots are too small for this to make a big difference. It would, however, allow for less pavement and more green space, which is in keeping with the city’s storm water management goals.

Does this affect single family homes? No, it does not.

2. Special Event Ordinance Workshop

Staff provided additional research materials, including the ordinance in effect in North St. Paul and their special event permit application. The worksheet requested by Commissioners at the last workshop had been emailed a couple of weeks earlier, and copies were provided in the packet and at the meeting. The three-page worksheet covers every question raised at the previous workshop, plus additional issues added by staff. It provides space for Commissioners to consider and comment on nearly 40 event-related issues from general (e.g. what kinds of events would be addresses) to specific (e.g. hours of operation to be allowed).

Commissioner comments:

- Parking is still a big concern, especially event held at the same time as major Fairgrounds events
- Some Commissioners felt that parking might not be that much of a problem during big Fairground events because parking is already restricted on city streets and the businesses are hoping for walk-in attendance from the Fairground.
- Noise was also a major concern.
- Fireworks should not be allowed as part of events
- Private parties at people's homes should not be covered. (Generally, they are not included in typical municipal special event ordinances.)

The discussion then turned from impact on neighborhoods and residents to impact on city resources and budget. Commissioners asked what would happen if the City adopted a special events ordinance. How would the applications be reviewed? Which staff and departments would need to be brought in on the review process? How much staff time would it take to process the application and make a decision? How much staff time would it take to cover administrative and support activities for the event itself? What about extra policing? What would be the added costs to the city over all? Could fees be charged to an amount that would cover the additional costs? Staff acknowledged that a lot of these things would not be known until we actually put the permitting into practice. There would be learning from experience.

Commissioners uniformly expressed a desire to be business friendly. Several of them said they would probably attend the kinds of events proposed. However, they were aware that a lot of staff preparation goes into managing parking and other matters related to the State Fair and the June car show, even though these events are on the Fairgrounds and not under direct City jurisdiction. They questioned whether it is wise for the City to take on additional expenses of this kind when they could not see any clear benefit except to the business wanting to hold events, especially when there could be negative impacts on neighborhoods.

After lengthy discussion, Commissioners polled themselves on how to proceed. Except for one Commissioner who was opposed to allowing special events at all, most said they were not comfortable proceeding without a clear mandate from the City Council. After thinking about all the questions that had arisen in two workshops, they were not convinced a special event ordinance is in the best interests of the City. They felt creating this would be a significant task for the Planning Commission requiring additional time – probably on the order of the front porch amendment or more. Without clear backing and a definite directive from the Council, they are reluctant to move forward.

This conclusion will be communicated to the Council. Staff will ask the city attorney what formal process should be used, if any, for the Commission to make that communication and ask for that mandate. If the Council directs the Commission to go ahead, this topic will be taken up again at the next opportunity.

3. Prairie Garden Ordinance

Due to the late hour, this topic was tabled to a future workshop.

The workshop adjourned at about 9:15 p.m.