

**City of Falcon Heights
Planning Commission Minutes
February 24, 2009**

PRESENT: Commissioners Gosline, Gustafson, Hasegawa, Noble, Rodich and Watkins, City Council Liaison Kuettel. Also present was Staff Liaison Deb Jones.

ABSENT: Commissioners Salzberg, with notice

A quorum being present, the meeting was called to order by the Chair at 7:03 p.m.

The new commissioners, Keith Gosline and Randall Gustafson, introduced themselves and were welcomed to the Planning Commission. Commissioners reelected Eric Watkins to serve as chair and elected Richard Rodich as vice chair.

The policies and standing rules were reviewed. Commissioner Rodich commented that a discrepancy in numbering the rules of order was not corrected from last year. Staff took note and will make the correction.

The Planning Commission minutes for November 25, 2008 were approved.

Garages for Multi-family properties in R-4 with alleys

Staff liaison Jones provided an introduction. Several owners of smaller multi-family properties on Larpenteur have approached the city with ideas for removing or replacing old garages. With one exception, these buildings were constructed before 1950. All of them have small lots on alleys, and none of them have the space to provide the parking that is required in the present code. Between the setback requirements and parking requirements in the city code, these owners are in the position of having to apply for variances to make almost any change short of replacing existing garages on the same footprint. A chart of lot sizes and available parking was provided to commissioners, as well as maps and aerial photographs.

Staff requested the commission to consider whether the situation might be simplified and better options provided by making some modification of zoning requirements for apartment garages for apartment buildings adjacent to alleys. If the Commission came up with specific suggestions for amending the code, the City Attorney would be asked to draft an ordinance for action at a future meeting.

The Chair suggested that the commissioners might prefer to adjourn to a workshop to work through issue. Commissioner Rodich said he would like to air initial reactions before going to a workshop format.

Councilmember Kuettel asked for some clarification: Is staff specifically recommending a change to the setback requirements for these apartments? Jones said that reducing the side setbacks presently required (10 feet to 30 feet) for R-4 to the 5 feet required for neighboring single family properties was one possible approach that could be considered. In that case, however, there is a concern that there might be a net loss of available parking in an area where parking, both off street and on street, is at a premium. There are competing issues to weigh here, including neighborhood character, and changing the setback is only one possible option.

Commissioner Gustafson asked if the goal is to not have to rule on variances for each of the buildings separately, one at a time. Jones said the hope was to anticipate and simplify the process for owners' future improvements, but only two owners have even approached the city so far. In response to questions from the commissioners, Jones said that a change to lot coverage requirements was not recommended, nor expanding structures any closer to the side street than they already are on corner lots. Commissioner Gosline asked what parking would be gained by allowing wider garages. Jones said there was, in fact, likely to be a net loss of one or more parking spaces if a garage was allowed to be built with a five foot setback on each side. Some of these properties have uncovered parking from one side line to the other; they could lose a space at each end.

The commissioners having finished their questions, the Chair deferred the rest of the discussion to workshop.

INFORMATION AND ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Ms. Jones announced training opportunities for planning commissioners through Government Training Service, and asked them to contact her after the meeting if they were interested.

ADJOURNMENT: The meeting was adjourned at 7:40 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Deborah Jones, Staff Liaison

Workshop discussion

The following points were brought forward in the workshop discussion on R-4 garages on alleys after the meeting:

- Commissioners were concerned about a possible net loss of on-site parking where garages are built to five-foot setback
- Commissioners did not seem to feel that the value to owners of having more enclosed parking would outweigh this loss because the results would serve fewer tenants and put more cars on the streets.
- Would the garages be used for parking only, or would further tenant parking be lost to owner storage in new garages? Could the city require the owner to use the space for tenant parking only?
- What would be the impact of a “wall of garages” on the residents across the alley on California? It would change the character of the alley and the neighborhood and might be unwelcome.
- Are there fire safety considerations if the alley becomes a “wall of garages”?
 - Staff consulted the fire department after the meeting. Whenever structures are close together there is a danger of fire spreading from one to another. However, access for emergency equipment in the alley would not be a problem as the street is the primary access.
- Is a change to the code really necessary if only a small number of owners have expressed an interest in making a change?

A consensus began to emerge from the discussion: Since the potential number of properties involved is small, a code amendment may be too broad a solution and future changes are best handled on a case by case basis, at the initiative of the property owners. Furthermore, commissioners were not comfortable with reducing side setbacks across the board, even under the limiting condition of having an alley, especially if the result is a net loss of off-street parking.

Commissioner Hasegawa suggested that removing the requirement that half the parking spaces be enclosed would at least allow the removal of existing garages without a variance. (A variance would be required now because reducing the number of enclosed parking spaces increases the amount of nonconformity in every case.) Staff confirmed that in some cases this might even add a parking space or two.

After further discussion, commissioners agreed that removing the enclosed parking requirement for these R-4 properties on alleys is the only code amendment they are prepared to recommend at this time. This would give owners the option of demolishing existing garages and replacing them with surface parking without a variance. However, new garages would still have to meet zoning requirements or property owners would have to apply for variances to be handled on a case by case basis. The commissioners instructed staff to request that the city attorney prepare a draft ordinance for hearing at the next meeting.