

Falcon Heights Planning Commission Workshop Minutes – March 22, 2011

Present: Commissioners Black, Brown, Gustafson, Minns, Noble, Wartick, Councilmember Harris, Staff Liaison Jones, Linda Fite (appointed to the Commission but not yet formally confirmed)

Attendees were reintroduced to the topic of public land in Falcon Heights and reviewed Section 113-180. The comprehensive plan calls for the conversion of the present P-1 district from an overlay to a regular zoning district. The reason for this was to provide the City with more flexibility and control should the large public institutions decide to sell some of their land for private use in the future. Discussion of public land had been postponed in 2010 to concentrate on the need to establish a new district for future housing needs.

When the public land discussion was postponed in 2010, Commissioners had been considering the option of dividing the existing public land district (overlay) into two districts, one for the University and State Fair (public institutional uses) and another for the remaining P-1 properties, including City Hall, Curtiss Field, Falcon Heights Elementary School and the Gibbs Museum of Pioneer and Dakota Life, owned and operated by the Ramsey County Historical Society. Staff had suggested the alternative of keeping one district but adding more specifics to Section 113-180.

Commission Chair David Black raised questions about the inclusion of RCHS land in the public land district, especially in light of the very vague language of Section 113-180, which basically places no setback or other controls on any lands in the existing P-1 overlay. His concern is that the RCHS is not clearly a public institution and, unlike the University of Minnesota and State Fair the City, does have zoning jurisdiction but “no rules” under 113-180. Other commissioners expressed similar concerns: that the language of the section implies that owners can “do anything they want,” as long as plans are provided to the City, and this may not be in the best public interest. The lack of specifics makes some sense for the University and State Fair which are both independent of the City’s zoning jurisdiction; it may not make sense for the other P-1 lands. The present R-1 zoning with P-1 overlay may not make sense either.

Commissioners determined that the Ramsey County Historical Society is a non-profit organization, not a government entity, which means that it is more like TIES (presently zoned B-3 and R-5M) than like the University and State Fair. Furthermore, the adjoining 2129 Larpentour Avenue property, formerly a private residence and still zoned R-1, has been acquired by the Society and needs appropriate zoning for the organization’s business use. It has been several years since the Commission has had an update on the Society’s plans for that part of its property, and Commissioners wanted to know the status of that property and what the Society’s intentions are now.

In view of these concerns and unknowns, the Commission concluded that more information is needed before any rezoning can be undertaken of the non-institutional properties in P-1, especially Gibbs Museum. Staff will seek input from the city attorney on this issue and organize a continuation of the workshop in April.