

About This Place

Coming Soon To A Neighborhood Near You: Heliports And Bars?

By Lyn Widmyer

The Jefferson County Commission is reviewing recommendations from the Jefferson County Planning Commission for seven new commercial zoning categories. A public hearing is scheduled for Thursday, September 6, at 7pm in the meeting room on the lower level of the Charles Town Library.

One of the proposed zones is Neighborhood Commercial (NC). The purpose of the zone is to "permit . . . small scale commercial uses" at appropriate locations. As a professional planner, I support mixed use development. During my 30 years as a county planner, I helped write plans that integrated commercial uses into planned neighborhoods. Why am I concerned about the Neighborhood Commercial Zone?

The list of permitted and conditional uses is too broad. The zone allows what you might expect for neighborhood retail, including banks, convenience stores, and professional offices. However, the zone also allows heliports and bar/nightclubs as conditional uses. I question allowing these activities in a neighborhood commercial zone even as conditional uses.

What are suitable locations? The proposed Neighborhood Commercial District defines suitable locations as properties within a quarter-mile of an existing residential subdivision or development of at least 20 dwelling units, all properties located on primary or secondary roads shown in the com-

mercial map of Jefferson County and drawing a quarter-mile radius around them, my question is, "Where ISN'T neighborhood commercial allowed?"

In addition to Neighborhood Commercial, other new zones being proposed include General Commercial, Highway Commercial, Light Industrial, Major Industrial, Planned Neighborhood Development and Office/Commercial Mixed Use.

Suitable locations for commercial zones of the scale and intensity represented by these seven zoning districts should be guided by the Jefferson County Comprehensive Plan. The current comprehensive plan did not anticipate these zones. This means zoning requests will be reviewed on a case by case basis by the County Commission without any planning guidance as to where they should be applied. As a member of the commission, I expressed this concern months ago, suggesting an amendment to the Comprehensive Plan to define appropriate locations for new commercial zoning. The public would have the opportunity to comment. This did not happen.

Another major concern is that there is no requirement for a traffic analysis or impact study at time of zoning. As a professional planner, I believe

traffic impacts should weigh heavily in deciding whether a proposed commercial zoning application is approved. A developer should be required to provide road improvements to support commercial uses. The public should not have to rely on the state highway department to address local congestion resulting from a zoning approval for commercial uses.

The purpose of the proposed new zones is to provide more choices for property owners wanting commercial development. An equally important purpose of these zones should be to protect the character of existing neighborhoods. More safeguards to assure compatibility with nearby residential areas need to be included in these zones.

All of the commercial zones being proposed are "floating zones." This means individual property owners can apply for them at any time as long as locational criteria are met. Without any comprehensive plan guidance regarding compatibility, and without any requirement for traffic impact studies, approval of these floating zones may leave existing neighborhoods dead in the water.

Lyn Widmyer is a member of the Jefferson County Commission. These views are solely her own.