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City Temporarily Suspends Converting Buildings to Housing for Non-family Members

Meeting October 3, St. Ignace Council Also Considers New Manager Search, Lack of Bids for City Hall Steps

By Sam Morgen

No more buildings in St. Ignace can be converted from their current use to residential housing for nonfamily members, according to a temporary moratorium passed by the St. Ignace City Council at a council session Monday, October 3.

The city will not issue any new zoning permits allowing residential occupancy of a structure by nonfamily members, possibly until February 1, 2017.

But if housing ordinances being worked on by the planning commission are approved by the city council before February 1, the moratorium could be lifted sooner. The city seeks to provide opportunities for workers to be housed in town, but to keep boardinghouses out of the downtown district, and is carefully considering the language that will accomplish those aims.

Residential houses being turned into employee housing are the primary targets of the moratorium, City Manager Les Therrian said, although, he added, he has not received any zoning permit requests in the last six months, nor could he find anywhere in the city's zoning laws where property owners are required to obtain zoning permits for nonfamily housing.

City Attorney Tom Evashevski wrote the resolution.

“It’s essentially a moratorium,” Mr. Evashevski told *The St. Ignace News*. He said the resolution would formally notify developers and purchasers the city is in the process of changing the rules for land use around the city.

Any change of use of a building, whether it be from a residential house to a rental unit or from a motel to an apartment complex, requires a zoning permit, and possibly a building permit, because the codes are different, depending on the building’s use, Mr. Evashevski said.

The St. Ignace Planning Commission has been working on the wording for the amendments since July, and has held a public hearing on them, but has not brought them to the city council because commissioners still harbor concerns about getting the language just right. The moratorium allows the city time to do so.

Commissioners had intended to bring the amendments to the council Monday, but Mr. Evashevski wanted to review them at the planning commission’s Wednesday, October 5, meeting before possibly presenting them to the city council Monday, October 17. *(See related story in this issue.)*

“This gives us time to write the ordinances correctly and make sure we are meeting all the needs,” Mayor Connie Litzner said. “We’ve got so much done, but we’re just not quite there.”

Planning Commission Chair Betsy Dayrell-Hart said at the meeting the moratorium would help to quell speculation that property is being purchased to be turned into employee housing.

“We just want to set everyone’s mind at rest,” she said. “We don’t want to start any new projects until City Council has had a chance to decide if it wants the [zoning amendments] passed.”

In related discussion, Dean Reid, chairman of the Mackinac County Planning Commission and Mackinac Economic Alliance (MEA), repeated his concerns of the proposed housing amendments, which he expressed to the city planning commission September 21. He said the minimum 300 gross square feet of living space requirement for each non-family member in a residency would deter developers from purchasing and renovating old St. Ignace buildings.

“I hate to think that MEA has wasted our time this year in trying to find developers, and talking with developers, about converting these properties into long-term rental units to

increase housing capacity and utilize closed or for-sale hotels, for use before they rot into the ground like the old Rivera Motel,” said Mr. Reid.

He predicted the proposed changes will increase the housing shortage in St. Ignace.

Dr. Dayrell-Hart told *The St. Ignace News* the space requirements for non-family members living in one rental unit had been carefully thought through, taking into consideration minimum state living requirements for places like jails, hospital beds, and college dormitories.

She said, when comparing the zoning ordinance amendments to college dormitories, considerations for students living in the dormitories needs to account for the spaces like libraries, gymnasiums, and study areas students have access to.

Employees living in an apartment or boardinghouse do not have access to all the facilities students do, so housing for non-family members in St. Ignace should be required to be more spacious than student dormitories.

“We need to ensure everybody has enough space to live a humane life,” she said, “including the neighbors.”

City Manager Search

Council will hold a work session on the second Monday of each month to work toward hiring a new city manager to replace Mr. Therrian, who is retiring.

Councilman Steven Paquin prompted the plan, proposed by Mayor Litzner, when he noted the hiring process had stalled and asked that the city council use committees to expedite the process.

City Hall Front Steps

The city received no bids for its City Hall front step project and will advertise for bids again in February when potential contractors are less busy.

Two contractors, R.C. Hendrick Construction of Saginaw and K&K Concrete Contractors of De- Tour, looked at the project but did not submit bids by the Friday, September 30, deadline because, according to Mr. Therrian, they were already committed to other projects this fall.

New Jail Bond Proposal

The proposed new county jail was reviewed with the city council by Mackinac County Sheriff Scott Strait and Michigan State Police Post Commander Natalie King.

The facility would be constructed on the south end of the Mackinac County Courthouse campus. Voters will be asked to approve a 20-year, 0.76 mill tax levy November 8, which will raise \$12.35 million for the 80-bed jail.

The jail can now hold 28 inmates and is often overcrowded. The new facility, Sheriff Strait said, would allow inmates to be segregated by gender and severity of offense and provide space for a classroom and counseling for the inmates.

Lt. King said she was shocked when she first saw the cramped conditions in the jail.

“I was seeing lawsuits all over the place,” she told the council.

Sheriff Strait said the final design for the jail had not been determined. It would depend on some factors, like the sale of two houses at the end of Truckey Street as well as the city abandoning the end of Truckey Street.

Taxi Permit Denial

The city’s taxi driver law has come under review and will be amended to be more specific about what Michigan driver licenses are required.

Police Chief Mark Wilk denied a taxi permit request to Richard Roger III of St. Ignace because Mr. Roger does not have a Michigan chauffeur’s license. He submitted a Missouri commercial driver license with his application for a taxi driver permit.

Mr. Wilk said the city’s ordinances require a state commercial license, but the ordinance does not distinguish which state, nor exactly which kind of commercial license. He was directed to return to the city council with proposed amendments to clear up confusion and inconsistencies.

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