

Franklin officials to soften changes in downtown zoning

By Brian Benson/Daily News staff

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FRANKLIN - Planning staff last night softened a proposal to create a downtown zoning district after meeting with residents and downtown business and property owners.

Planning Director Bryan Taberner proposed the new zoning district last year as a way to allow by-right mixed-use development where the bottom floor is commercial and the upper floors are residential or office space.

But several town councilors and downtown business and property owners worried the proposal would drive away businesses by making height, parking and other requirements too strict.

"Downtown is a very unique area," Taberner told about 25 people who attended the meeting. "It is much different than a half-mile (away). It's perfect for transit-oriented, mixed-use (development)."

That overall concept is still important to creating a vibrant downtown, but planning staff plan to soften some of the planned changes from downtown's current commercial zoning as a result of the meeting, he said.

The proposal initially included parking mandates for residential and commercial space, but the new plan requires 1.5 spaces per residential unit and no commercial parking. Under current zoning, there are no parking requirements for residential or commercial projects allowed by right.

That change pleased Diane Glass, who owns a commercial building on East Central Street. Glass worried that if property owners were required to add parking spaces for commercial space, they would limit the parking to their customers, creating empty spaces when those businesses were closed.

"There's plenty of parking in downtown if we share it," Glass said after the meeting. "We've just got to work together."

Glass and several other property and business owners said after the meeting that they were glad planning staff took the time to listen to them.

"I like the changes," said Michael Mouhanna, who owns Depot Plaza on Main Street. "This could improve downtown, which is what we want."

In previous zoning proposals, services such as medical and dental offices were limited to upper floors or the back of buildings in favor of shops and restaurants on first-floor spaces in the front of buildings.

Under the new plan, those services would be allowed on first floors, where many are presently located, Taberner said.

Garden centers, gas and service stations and single- and two-family homes would not be allowed downtown.

That angered Margaret Ranieri, whose family owns property downtown.

I think the three gas stations that are presently (downtown) are well situated," said Ranieri, who thought single-family homes add variety to the area.

Resident Robert Landry, who lives near downtown on Summer Street, thought many of the changes were too strict.

"I think people that own property should have the right to do what (they) want with it," he said.

Taberner said some changes, such as requiring a 5-foot setback from the front of property lines, should help property owners because it would create a more pedestrian-friendly downtown.

Current zoning requires a 20-foot setback, but many buildings on Main Street were built before the requirement and have no setback, creating narrow sidewalks, Taberner said.

"I understand nobody wants to give up the right to do something on your property ... but when you want to create a really vibrant downtown, wider sidewalks are actually good," Taberner said.

Town Administrator Jeffrey Nutting said property owners could seek relief from the requirements through the Planning Board and Zoning Board of Appeals.

Much of the new zoning would not apply to existing buildings unless the owner decided to build a new building or make significant changes to its use, Nutting and Taberner said.

Planning staff will work on revising the proposal based on last night's discussion in preparation for presenting it to Town Council. The Town Council and Planning Board must approve the zoning district before it would take effect.

Brian Benson can be reached at 508-634-7582 or bbenson@wickedlocal.com