



CITY OF WHITE SALMON
Planning Commission Meeting - Wednesday, November 14, 2023

COMMISSION AND ADMINISTRATIVE PERSONNEL PRESENT

Commission Members:

Greg Hohensee, Chair
Seth Gilchrist
Michael Morneault
Tom Stevenson
Ross Henry

Staff:

Stephanie Porter, City Clerk-Treasurer
Troy Rayburn, City Administrator
Kelly Hickok, Legal Counsel

Planning Consultants:

Michael Mehaffy, Consultant Housing Planner

CALL TO ORDER/ ROLL CALL

Chairman Greg Hohensee called the meeting to order at 5:35 pm. A quorum of planning commissioner members was present. There was an unrecorded number of audience members in attendance in person and via teleconference.

PUBLIC HEARING (CONTINUED)

1. Housing Action Plan - Draft Zoning Ordinance

The Planning Commission gathered for the continuation of discussion and action on updated housing ordinances for the City of White Salmon. Chairman Greg Hohensee continued the public hearing discussion at 5:36 PM.

A. DISCUSSION

Chair Greg Hohensee stated that the recommendation from city staff is to concentrate conversation on the draft provided, understanding that making significant changes to it would deviate from the focus.

The Planning Commission reviewed the drafted housing code update intended to increase density and affordability. They agreed to focus discussion on the provided draft.

Commissioners debated about increasing allowances for accessory dwelling units (ADUs), with some expressing caution due to infrastructure limits while others saw ADUs as crucial for affordability. Commissioners proposed a tiered approach allowing one ADU per lot in lower-density zones to address concerns about rapid growth.

The debate also centered on allowing higher residential portions in commercial zones, with differing views on appropriate limits to encourage mixed-use without displacing businesses. A suggestion for a 50-50 commercial-residential split on ground floors aimed to activate streets while accommodating housing needs.

Discussions on height restrictions in residential and commercial zones included considerations of fire safety standards at narrow setbacks, leading to a decision to maintain all minimum residential side setbacks at five feet. Allowances in the riverfront district proposed to remain unchanged pending further definition.

In summary, the Planning Commission generally agreed on the following:

- Parking Requirements: Remove language about reducing parking within 1/4 mile of transit stops, but table further parking discussions for a future update.
- Building Heights: Limit height conversations to the riverfront district for this update, leaving heights unchanged in other zones.
- Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs): Reduce outright allowed ADUs from 3 per lot to 1 per lot in all zones, with potential for more through conditional use permits.
- Setbacks: Keep side setbacks at five feet in the residential zones.
- Residential/Commercial Mix: Discussed requiring a percentage (50-100%) of the ground floor facing main streets to be commercial, with residential above. No final agreement reached.

Commissioners raised concerns about limited community awareness and input, acknowledging outreach efforts but noting the complexity of the code required clearer explanation of its impacts. There was unease regarding the lack of public input and transparency in the process.

B. ACTION

Motion

Moved by Seth Gilchrist. Seconded by Ross Henry.

Motion to forward the document as edited on to the City Council for their consideration.

Discussion

Commissioner Tom Stevenson expressed his hope that others understand the significance of taking decisive action rather than merely changing words. He emphasized the importance of discussing potential pitfalls to prevent misunderstandings. Despite this, he believes that the product being passed is valuable and worthwhile.

Chair Greg Hohensee voiced his concerns about the lack of community understanding and involvement in the proposed housing code update. He emphasized that while developers may find profitability in the changes, it represents a fundamental shift in the housing code that the community may not fully comprehend. He criticized the timing of the release of the draft code, which he felt limited public input and discussion. Hohensee urged for more time for the community to understand and provide feedback on the proposed changes before voting on recommending the update to the city council. He expressed disappointment in the lack of broader community representation in the discussion and hoped for support in delaying the decision to allow for more inclusive input.

Commissioner Ross Henry expressed gratitude for the comments and reflected on his six years of experience on the commission. He acknowledged the importance of updates to the housing code, which he believed were significant for the community. Henry mentioned previous initiatives that were beneficial but acknowledged concerns about exaggerated fears of drastic changes. He expressed personal confidence in the proposed changes not leading to dire consequences.

Regarding public involvement, Henry admitted that there's always room for improvement but expressed skepticism about significant changes in developer engagement over time. He stressed the importance of community understanding and encouraged efforts to inform residents about the proposed changes.

Commissioner Henry acknowledged that the decision ultimately lies with the council and encouraged their thorough communication with the community. He concluded by noting that while he respected differing opinions, he disagreed with the notion that the proposed changes would be detrimental.

Commissioner Seth Gilchrist expressed appreciation for the comments and echoed Commissioner Henry's sentiments. He acknowledged that while the commission's efforts to reach out to the community could be improved, he hoped it was just the beginning of a more comprehensive process. Gilchrist emphasized the need to invest in experienced individuals to guide them through the process and ensure a better outcome.

Commissioner Gilchrist noted that some community members who spoke at the meeting, were not developers but had valuable insights. Gilchrist critiqued the developer survey, suggesting that many developers were content with the status quo and benefited from it, while individuals trying to build their own houses faced frustrations.

Despite concerns, Gilchrist supported moving forward with the proposed changes but urged against complacency, emphasizing the need for continued urgency in addressing housing issues. He believed the changes would benefit those in the community looking to build on their own lots.

Commissioner Michael Morneault reflected on past experiences with property development; he noted past opposition from residents. Morneault expressed empathy for a resident who opposed the annexation, feeling conflicted about the situation.

Commissioner Morneault raised a question about the possibility of forwarding the current proposal to the city council and its potential passage.

Chair Greg Hohensee expressed uncertainty about the procedural implications of not making a recommendation but emphasized his belief that whatever the outcome, the matter would likely face litigation due to the contentious nature of the issue. He clarified that his objection was not to the content of the proposal, which he largely supported, but rather to the lack of public awareness and input.

Chair Hohensee lamented the rapid pace at which the proposal was being pushed through without sufficient time for public reaction. He explained that his vote against making a recommendation was intended to send a message to the City Council that the process lacked transparency and adequate public engagement. He argued that such drastic changes should have been more clearly communicated to residents, rather than simply labeled as an "update."

Commissioner Michael Morneault expressed agreement with Chair Hohensee's concerns about the complexity and potential contradictions within the current code. He supported Hohensee's proposal for a vote against making a recommendation, indicating alignment with the Chair's stance on the matter.

Commissioner Tom Stevenson appreciated Chair Greg Hohensee's remarks and noted that his own comments were meant to convey a hopeful and positive perspective. He expressed full agreement with Hohensee's ultimate goal and pondered the best path to achieve it,

suggesting incremental steps. Commissioner Stevenson indicated his intention to vote "nay" as well.

Commissioner Ross Henry raised a procedural question regarding whether the council would still have the ability to proceed with the proposed updates if the commission did not make a recommendation.

Legal Counsel Kelly Hickok clarified that regardless of whether the commission forwarded the proposal to the council, the council still retained the authority to decide on it.

Commissioner Henry emphasized the effort put into the proposal and believed it should be presented to the council for consideration.

MOTION FAILED 5–0.

Henry – Aye, Stevenson – Nay, Gilchrist – Aye, Morneault– Nay, Hohensee – Nay.

Chairman Greg Hohensee closed the public hearing at 7:27 PM.

General Discussion

Chair Greg Hohensee expressed concern about the absence planner, which was making their work more challenging. He highlighted the strain on Project Coordinator Erika Castro Guzman, who was handling multiple roles, impacting applications, commission work, and city council functions. Chair Hohensee urged the city to address the lack of a replacement planner and questioned why action hadn't been taken yet.

The City Administrator, Troy Rayburn, acknowledged the Commission's concern about the lack of a replacement planner. He mentioned the city's interest in conducting a pay equity study to align job description with pay rates compared to similar municipalities.

City Administrator Rayburn assured the Commission that their message regarding the need for a principal planner was heard and would be communicated clearly. The City Administrator praised the Commission's diligence and seriousness in their deliberations. He highlighted the extensive efforts made by city staff, including the mayor, public outreach, notification, and inclusion. This included various forums, walking tours, and other initiatives aimed at engaging the community, emphasizing that these efforts involved ordinary citizens rather than just developers. He urged the commission to recognize and appreciate the hard work of city staff in facilitating public engagement.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 7:30 pm.

Greg Hohensee, Chairman

Erika Castro Guzman, City Project Coordinator