

City wants some stores near homes

Growth: Leaders see need for 'commercial nodes' at busy intersections to reduce driving

By Dan Black - Idaho Press-Tribune, July 11, 2006

NAMPA — On Nampa's outskirts, where new subdivisions have turned country roads into busy intersections, proposals to build businesses have city officials treading lightly.

On the one hand, businesses could help the quality of life for nearby residents, giving them services close to home. Then again, too much retail could change the character of the neighborhood, turning it into strip development. A few proposals this spring are testing Nampa's ability to guide this kind of hybrid growth.

Commercial zoning in otherwise residential neighborhoods can be controversial, according to Norm Holm, Nampa's planning director. It just depends, he said, on how big the commercial development is, and whether people in the area see it as a benefit or a burden.

Nampa's comprehensive plan, which was updated in 2004, spells out two new kinds of commercial zones for these areas. Requests this summer have been among the first to fall under those two categories. The projects are helping point to what will and won't be allowed.

"We're going through these defining moments," said Nampa Mayor Tom Dale, adding that he believes the new zones will ultimately help the city.

Projects test planning rules

For decades, Nampa city leaders have tried to keep commercial development away from residential neighborhoods.

But Mayor Tom Dale said a change in thinking allows for more flexibility and encourages a mixed use of urban areas. That decreases reliance on vehicles and encourages people to walk, he said.

Under the old way of thinking, "you institutionalized the need to drive everywhere," the mayor explained.

Nampa recently faced its first opportunity to institute mixed-use development through two new zones amended into its comprehensive plan in 2004.

One request for commercial development in a neighborhood was denied by the city and one was approved, illustrating how the city wants to see commercial projects integrated into neighborhoods.

The Nampa City Council denied a proposal for a grocery store north of Nampa on the corner of Ustick and Franklin roads on July 5. The Planning and Zoning Commission had also recommended denial of the zoning request.

Several area residents spoke against the project. They said the grocery store and small plaza on nearly 14 acres and its accompanying apartment complex on 12 acres would be out of character for the neighborhood, which has been largely developed with high-end homes that are typically on 2 or more acres each.

The project was proposed for a "neighborhood center" zone, which can mix high-density housing with light commercial and public uses, such as parks, schools or churches.

But the city determined that the plan was simply for a large grocery, some smaller retail shops and four-plexes. As a result, the commission said the project, proposed by Centennial Development, was too big and didn't fit the character of the neighborhood.

Traffic concerns arise

Residents told the council that the stores would increase traffic to the area.

Nampa Planning Director Norm Holm and Dale said traffic is a key consideration for having small commercial development near new subdivisions.

"When people go shopping," Holm said, "they climb in their cars and drive."

If stores are close to their neighborhoods, there will be less congestion, he said. Otherwise, motorists have to drive through multiple neighborhoods to get to a business, which worsens congestion across the whole city.

But if the nearby development is too big, Holm said, a local business can bring new problems. Holm said the proposed grocery at Ustick and Franklin roads would have drawn motorists into that neighborhood, rather than just serve the locals.

The comprehensive plan says neighborhood centers should "serve residents within a two- to three-square mile area."

At the City Council meeting, only Councilman Martin Thorne voted to approve the annexation and zoning, saying this kind of hub will reduce traffic overall.

Stores close to homes

Another, but smaller, commercial area proposed near the new Columbia High School on Amity Avenue was approved by both the Planning Commission and the City Council for annexation and zoning.

The parcel is 2.7 acres, near an existing, small commercial center and was approved as a

"Potential Commercial Node," the second new zone in the comprehensive plan to accommodate retail near residential neighborhoods.

Holm said this kind of development is "not as clearly defined," and is "not as neighborhood-based."

Zoning for neighborhood centers, Holm explained, implies possible schools, churches, parks and higher-density housing, whereas commercial nodes are simply small commercial areas.

Dale said they are confined to single intersections, and can't be considered strip development.

The zone, according to the comprehensive plan, is "intended to provide development flexibility to encourage a more diverse mix of land uses."

But their location is not precise. The city's comprehensive plan identifies many key intersections that might be appropriate for commercial areas, but the Amity development is not directly on an intersection.

"Those are just placeholders," said Sharla Arledge, Nampa's city spokeswoman. She explained that as developers express interest in developing those areas, the city can have flexibility to grant commercial zoning.

During the July 5 discussion, council members asked whether these neighborhood businesses are merely another form of strip development.

Holm explained that the comprehensive plan says that if one commercial node is developed, other intersections in the area should not be developed.

Another community business area was recently annexed and zoned near the intersection of Lake Lowell Avenue and Middleton Road, but nothing has yet been developed there, Holm said.

The new zones will be defined better as time goes on, both Holm and Dale agree. But until then, individual requests will be weighed on their merits.

Planned neighborhood centers

- Comprehensive Plan's designated neighborhood centers
- Birch Lane east of 11th Avenue North: 352 acres
- Happy Valley Road north of Amity Avenue: 294 acres
- 12th Avenue Road at East Lewis Lane: 370 acres

- Greenhurst Road west of Sunnyridge Road: 255 acres
- Lake Lowell at Midland Road: 400 acres
- Ustick Road at Franklin Road: 565 acres
- Highway 20-26 and Can-Ada Road: 339 acres

Total: 2,575 acres