

Hokah council turns down apartment request

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The Hokah City Council at its May 6 meeting turned down a request from a downtown property owner to turn a vacant storefront into residential apartments.

The owner petitioned the city planning commission for permission to convert the former grocery store at 44 Main St. – which has sat vacant for several years – into two apartments, split by a wall down the middle of the large, open room. According to city ordinance, apartments in the commercial business district require a conditional-use permit, city attorney Skip Wieser told the council.

That's different from a permitted use in that district, where the application is made, various requirements are met and the permit is issued. With the conditional use, the planning commission reviews the application and the city council makes the final decision, with conditions attached to the approval.

At issue is the ordinance's requirement that all apartments in the commercial district only be allowed on upper floors. The applicant's request is for units at street level. There are already living quarters on the second floor of the building.

"The way the proposal is today would be not eligible for a conditional-use permit because it's not on the upper floor," Wieser said, adding that the council can then either deny the application or, if it desires, set in motion the process of a text amendment that would essentially rewrite the ordinance so the requested use complies.

Councilors brought up several concerns. Matt Vetsch, also the city's fire chief, said from what he could tell, one apartment lacks an egress window, while another has only one door, which doesn't meet fire code. Wieser said a condition on the permit could require compliance with Minnesota state building codes, putting the onus on the contractor.

But aside from those details, councilor Kim Fordahl said the city has enough apartments and instead, she would like to see areas in the business district developed for their intended uses.

"I think we keep getting more and more apartments all the time and I'd like to see some city growth," she said. "We're not going to go anywhere because we're small, but maybe get some more businesses. ... I'd like to see some growth in our city, some improvements.

"Myself, I'd like to take a stand."

Vetsch is also concerned that if this precedent is set, ground-level apartments could eventually spread further down Main Street.

When asked if the council had to decide that night, Wieser said it had to act within 60 days or the application would be approved, so he suggested a decision be made. He outlined the concerns he heard from councilors, which also included adequate parking.

Based on the discussion, Fordahl motioned to deny the application based on the findings, with

councilor Judy Lonkoski seconding it. The motion passed 4-0. Mayor Jim Scholze was absent.

Chickens

In lighthearted fashion, the council discussed the possibility of allowing chickens within city limits. City administrator Rod Blank said he's received five requests recently to house chickens, but there's no ordinance on the books to regulate the practice.

Blank searched out ordinances in Rushford and Chatfield pertaining to urban chickens, and those typically outline the number that can be kept and forbids roosters and breeding. The city permits other domestic animals such as dogs and cats and requires them to be licensed. Blank suggested it might only be fair to do the same with chickens.

"Do they have to have a collar and a leash?" Lonkoski asked, eliciting chuckles.

Councilors said chickens could be viewed the same as a rabbit in a pen. Blank suggested setting a limit somewhere between four and six chickens and no roosters.

"I have no problem if they're contained. Now if they're walking down Main Street," Fordahl said. "There won't be free-range chickens."

"Any loose chickens will be considered a snack," acting mayor Jerry Martell added, setting off another round of laughs.

Once composed, the council agreed that if this were to be allowed, an ordinance would be needed, so Blank said he'd prepare one for councilors to consider and for attorney review next month.

In other news

- Public works employee Chris Oliver reported he attempted to get a second bid for reservoir cleaning, but was only able to secure, after several months of trying, one from a company the city previously used. Liquid Engineering's bid was for \$2,975, and because the council was happy with its work, it accepted the bid.
- Oliver also reported that several pieces of lumber on the shelters at the city park are rotten and in need of replacement. Martell said the Hokah Lions Club was going to take on that project last year, but it turned out more work was needed than it could handle.

He suggested, though, that the club might donate money to complete the improvements, with Oliver and another city employee performing the labor. The estimated repair cost is approximately \$1,300 and the plan is to complete the work before school dismisses for the summer and park use picks up. The council approved the work.

- The council approved a 5-year contract with Richard's Sanitation of Caledonia to continue providing refuse pickup within the city. The current 3-year contract expires on June 30.

The rate structure and prices would remain the same, Blank said, adding that he hasn't heard any resident complaints about service since the switch to totes. Martell abstained from the vote.

- Carl Ask from the Houston County Assessor's Office addressed the board during a brief board of appeal and equalization meeting, outlining real estate sales within the city. Last year, an 8-plex apartment in Hokah changed hands, representing an increase of 10 percent.

The city of Hokah hasn't been reassessed in quite awhile, Ask said, and by next year, new

aerial photos of the area should be available.

- The council approved a position to water city plants this summer at a yet-to-be-determined rate. The job is approximately one hour a day, five days a week.