

With Indian Hill in mind, Worcester panel tries to ease conversion of old schools to housing

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WORCESTER -- A City Council subcommittee has moved forward a proposal that would make it easier to convert former school buildings into housing.

The City Council Economic Development Committee Monday night unanimously endorsed a proposed amendment to the city's zoning ordinance that would allow the conversion of former school buildings to residential uses in all zoning districts.

Currently, multifamily residential uses are allowed by right in all business districts for buildings that are three stories or less, and in a limited number of business districts for buildings that are four stories or taller.

Multifamily residential uses are also allowed in Residential-General and Residential-Limited zones by special permit, only for buildings that are three stories or less.

The proposed amendment would allow former school buildings to be converted to multifamily residential use in all remaining residential and business zoning districts by special permit from the Planning Board.

Only school buildings constructed before 1950 would be eligible for special permit consideration for residential uses.

The petition requesting the zoning amendment was filed by Todd Rodman, a lawyer representing White Pickett Fence LLC, which is the owner of the former Indian Hill Elementary School at 155 Ararat St.

Mr. Rodman said his client is interested in renovating the school building, which at one time was also the home to the Salter School, to housing.

He said the footprint of the former school building would not be changed or expanded.

But because the building is located in an RS-7 zone, it cannot be converted to housing under the current zoning ordinance.

Stephen S. Rolle, director of the city Division of Planning and Regulatory Services, said the petition is supported by the Planning Department and Planning Board.

He said allowing school conversions in RS-7 and RS-10 zoning districts by special permit would give neighbors an opportunity to weigh in on specific projects.

"The staff believes that the proposal is consistent with city goals related to historic preservation and provision of quality housing stock of different types," Mr. Rolle said. "Further, residential uses are likely to have fewer neighborhood impacts than would the original institutional uses or comparable commercial re-use, and allowing these conversions only by special permit provides an additional level of oversight."

Councilor-at-Large Frederick C. Rushton, committee chairman, applauded the city administration and Mr. Rodman for bringing the petition forward.

He said the zoning amendment is limited in scope but balances the city's needs to reinvigorate older properties while maintaining their historical character.

District 1 Councilor Tony Economou said the checks-and-balances provision involving the Planning Board is key.

He said he has met with the developer of the Indian Hill school buildings and neighborhood residents, and all are on board with the project.

"It's an excellent fit for the school and the neighborhood," Mr. Economou said.

District 3 Councilor George J. Russell questioned why the amendment is limited only to former school buildings and does not include other former municipal buildings.

Michael E. Traynor, acting chief development officer, said a decision was made to initially target old school buildings to see how well it works.

The proposed zoning amendment would also include the following provisions:

The total square footage of the building could be increased by a maximum of 30 percent.

Any new construction must consist of similar materials and appearance as the existing structure.

The dimensional and parking requirements of the ordinance may be altered in conjunction with the granting of a special permit.

As part of the Planning Board's consideration for a special permit, it would take into account how the project deals with public open space, including walkways and pedestrian access to the building; and the maintenance of a historically appropriate exterior and building façade.

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