

The SunHerald

Posted on Sun, Dec. 03, 2006

RENEWAL

Residents hold SmartCode key

Citizen input will help shape zoning in neighborhoods

By JOSHUA NORMAN

GULFPORT - Residents are being given a nearly unprecedented opportunity in the coming months.

Every neighborhood in the city will be given the chance to decide exactly what it wants to look like now and what it will look like when it is time for the grandkids to start buying homes.

If Jeff Bounds - the city's special consultant on SmartCode - is right, there will no longer have to be angry arguments at City Council meetings over whether some condominium development around the corner should be built, or whether to allow that lumber yard down the road.

SmartCode is like zoning by committee, Bounds said, except that it addresses more than just zoning issues.

"It is a comprehensive land-use planning tool," Bounds said, adding SmartCode addresses transportation, public welfare, health, esthetic and real estate issues all at the same time.

In a way, if SmartCode sounds confusing, it is because it is. There is a lot to it, Bounds said, and there is also a community of dedicated urban planners across the country on standby to address problems that may arise.

The implementation for SmartCode in Gulfport really gets under way at 5:30 p.m. Thursday at the Gulfport High School gymnasium. Residents will hear about and discuss the basic framework of the plan. The City Council will then have the possibility of voting on it Dec. 18.

After that, a long series of community meetings should be held, Bounds said, that will calibrate the SmartCode to every neighborhood in the city.

Bounds said there will be many aspects of the code that will be community-specific, including whether to make SmartCode mandatory or not, what kind of architectural standards to impose, and how to allow streets to develop.

Bounds said one of the most noticeable differences between current zoning laws and SmartCode will come with the often-controversial issue of variances.

"If the building is built properly, those are non-issues," Bounds said.

To better define SmartCode and explain what it means for Gulfport, Dr. Jeff Bounds, a consultant hired by the city to help apply and implement the code, recently answered a few questions to break SmartCode down into layman's terms.

Q: What is SmartCode?

A: SmartCode is a comprehensive land-use planning ordinance that includes a zoning component and rules for creating new subdivision developments. The city of Gulfport is considering adopting a SmartCode framework that has been carefully tailored to the city over the last 9 months; the framework will allow neighborhoods to consider adopting a SmartCode zoning plan as an alternative to current conventional zoning. The framework only allows the option; it doesn't compel anyone or any area to use SmartCode.

Q: Why isn't there a zoning map?

A: The city is now only considering adoption of the framework. If the framework is adopted, the city will be divided into areas called Communities - such as Mississippi City, Orange Grove or North Gulfport, for example - and a SmartCode map will be proposed for each Community based on public input at last February's SmartCode charrette and open public meetings over the next few months. We hope to offer it within 3 months to every area of the City that is interested in considering a SmartCode Community Plan. Once a plan has been proposed, the plan can be adopted as an option or discarded. Some neighborhoods - especially older ones, may choose to adopt SmartCode in place of the current code.

Q: How is SmartCode different from conventional zoning?

A: SmartCode is based on town-design principles much older than conventional zoning. It combines the planning ideas from great old towns - towns the South was once famous for - with the latest understanding from the fields of transportation planning and urban studies, which over the last 30 years began to appreciate the difficulty of building great livable towns and cities.

Many of the ideas embedded in SmartCode are not new at all - old timers commonly say about SmartCode requirements "That's the way we used to build 'em!" New developments are required to have connected streets and alleys to reduce the added traffic load to our already overburdened traffic arteries. All planning revolves around creating and completing Communities and neighborhoods. Every Community (usually about 120 acres) should include a center, with some neighborhood retail (a hardware store, or a small coffee shop or restaurant, for example) and perhaps some small office space. Neighborhood and Community centers and downtowns should be pedestrian friendly, with sidewalks, trees and canopies for shade, and good pedestrian access. Houses in residential neighborhoods should put a good face to the street, and street trees should be provided in most areas.

Q: Does that mean there will be businesses opening in my neighborhood?

A: SmartCode allows mixed use only in neighborhood centers and highly urbanized areas. Suburban zones preserve single-family residential use and densities. SmartCode is primarily about encouraging diversity; that means town centers are denser and have mixed use, but neighborhood suburban areas are preserved at lower densities and single family. In fact, by encouraging higher densities in selected locations (like a downtown), SmartCode actually works to help keep other areas low-density and residential. It's this kind of variety that makes towns great.

Q: What advantages does SmartCode offer over current zoning?

A: SmartCode's advantages are clearest for new development and for old neighborhoods. For new development, SmartCode imposes realistic height and density limits on developers and makes variances largely unnecessary and very infrequent. In exchange, the code tightens requirements on developers for the things that make a real difference in the quality of neighborhoods. Because our current zoning requires variances for nearly any practical building, SmartCode offers real advantages over the system we currently utilize. SmartCode allows the neighborhoods to state their preferences for development in a very detailed way so that once the rules are in place and known, there's a level playing field for any interested developer willing to abide by the rules. The reduced time and uncertainty for developers reduces their costs and allows the neighborhoods to require more quality and attention to detail.

For old neighborhoods SmartCode also offers huge advantages over conventional zoning. Many of the most pleasant, most walkable, best-designed older neighborhoods in town have been slowly strangled by conventional zoning. The older neighborhood lots near town are frequently too small to easily meet conventional suburban size and setback requirements, and as a result many of the wonderful older homes in these neighborhoods are non-conforming under the conventional code. The result has been a slow but steady decline in many of these neighborhoods, and in some areas, outright blight where lots were too small to economically build on under conventional zoning.

SmartCode makes most of these homes and lots conforming again, and is ideally suited to support the resurgence of these older neighborhoods, which are reviving in cities across the nation. That's because SmartCode is based on exactly these kinds of neighborhoods. Essentially, for these neighborhoods SmartCode is just a return to good sense.

Q: How can I learn more about SmartCode?

A: Visit the city's Web site and get the code, or call City Hall and request a copy. Look for public meetings in the coming weeks, or send your questions to administrativeassistanttothemayor@ci.gulfport.ms.us.

- CITY OF GULFPORT