

Council eyes opening two commercial zones to residences

Goal is to fulfill affordable state housing mandate

By Michael J. Williams

Housing, including units affordable to lower-income households, could be allowed in a couple of Del Mar commercial zones as a result of City Council action Monday, July 1.

Council members voted 5-0 to explore the concept of converting two areas labeled the North Commercial Zone and Professional Commercial Zone to mixed-use commercial and residential sectors.

The northern zone encompasses 16 parcels bordered on the north side of the city by the San Dieguito River to the east and the coastal highway, titled Camino Del Mar within the city, to the west.

Opening up the northern zone to housing could potentially reap 262 residences, of which 52 would be required to be affordable lower-income residences.

The Professional Commercial Zone, which consists of several office buildings, occupies 1.3 acres situated in the center of town along Camino Del Mar between Eighth and Ninth streets.

If converted to mixed-use zoning, the properties could yield up to 26 homes, of which five would have to be affordable by low-income earners.

Yet, there is no guarantee that property owners would take advantage of the zoning code amendments. Whether the housing units will materialize is unknown.

The amendments are proposed to help the city meet a state mandate that each local government jurisdiction should provide a fair share of housing to all income levels.

That requirement has proven very difficult to meet in affluent coastal cities such as Del Mar where land is scarce and property values are high.

However, jurisdictions who fail to comply could face penalties, such as losing the power to issue building permits.

Three residents appeared at Monday's meeting to criticize the proposed changes.

Arnold Wiesel expressed concern about the effect on traffic and safety of adding residences to the northern zone.

“What bothers me is that with one brush stroke, we’re going to change this entire zone to somehow accommodate all future affordable housing, and I don’t think that really addresses the concern ...” Wiesel said.

“I don’t think you need to change an entire zone area and encumber it with a lot of traffic to make things very difficult.”

Council members, however, stressed that their decision Monday would only launch the process of instituting the zone code changes.

Over the ensuing months, the changes will require thorough environmental analyses and multiple public hearings before the Del Mar Planning Commission, City Council and California Coastal Commission.