

The Miami Herald

North Miami Beach council votes to overhaul longtime zoning, land-use laws

BY PATRICIA SAGASTUME, SPECIAL TO THE MIAMI HERALD
03/19/2015

When the city of North Miami Beach secretly conceded its beachfront access in the mid 1950s to what eventually became Sunny Isles Beach, it dramatically impacted its skyline and economic growth potential.

More than six decades later, NMB is still operating under many of the antiquated and often conflicting zoning-and-land-use laws from that era. But all that is about to change.

After two years of strategic planning sessions, public town hall meetings and at times explosive debates, North Miami Beach's mayor and council unanimously approved on second reading a major overhaul of the city's comprehensive planning and zoning codes. The zoning portion was presented in a separate amendment, which was also unanimously approved by the council at Tuesday night's meeting.

Mayor George Vallejo thanked the city staff, residents and fellow council members for "the courage it took" to stare down the naysayers.

"Our city had been held back for years by people who will come up and complain about any change," Vallejo said. "That is what kills communities because I can assure you there are 43,000 people in the city

and if 10 people come out to complain we got to remember there are 42,990 residents out there that are too busy leading their lives, helping their kids with their homework, getting work done, doing life stuff. That's why they elected us to do the right thing.”

For years, conflicting zoning and outdated land-use laws, along with public sentiment that disagreed with how the city should grow, have slowed economic growth, officials say. Residents watched as nearby cities, such as Sunny Isles Beach and Aventura, with less restrictive zoning laws, attracted multimillion dollar investments, wealth and luxurious living.

The new amendments aim to revamp eight sections of the city and allow for mixed-use development, permit higher density and building heights, create pedestrian and bike paths and add more green spaces. Some of the top priorities areas are along West Dixie Highway, Northeast 19th Avenue, Hanford and Biscayne boulevards. The city also hopes to attract more businesses to the area around Dixie Highway and 163rd Street.

“This is the night that legacies are made of,” City Manager Ana Garcia said.

The packed house of about 150 people, many developers and long-time residents praised the votes. Alan Macken, a local developer, contractor and investor, owns commercial properties on the West Dixie corridor.

“I’m proud in some small way to have acted as a catalyst for getting this off the ground. I’ve been in the city a long time and I know this has not been simple,” Macken said.

Councilwoman Beth Spiegel raised several technical issues including whether the language in the plan would limit access points into the Eastern Shores neighborhood. One resident complained that

homeowners in the neighborhood did not want the extra traffic that a project of possibly 2,000 new residential units could bring.

“Eastern Shores can’t function if there are not additional ways to get the public in and out [of the neighborhood],” Spiegel said.

City Attorney Jose Smith assured Spiegel that a subsection in the comprehensive plan requires developers to provide additional access points to the neighborhood. Councilwoman Marlen Martel said the plans had been fully dissected and that she would not vote to change anything of the final draft of the amendments.

Councilman Anthony DeFillipo, whose father Kenneth A. DeFillipo, served as a council member for 14 years, said growing up in political family gave him an insider’s view of what it takes to run a city. He thanked City Manager Garcia for sticking through the arduous planning sessions with the public and city officials.

“The strategic sessions were one of the most important things we went through. This is like the movie, *The Lion King*, when the sun comes out again when there were several clouds,” DeFillipo said.

Historian Seth Bramson, author of the book *From Farms and Fields to the Future: The Incredible History of North Miami Beach*, told the Miami Herald that the city was limited for ways it could enhance municipal services.

“We can not stop progress. Municipal services are dependent on taxes and this allows the city to keep improving them,” Bramson said.

Final approval could be a few weeks away, according to Redevelopment Management Associates (RMA) consultant Jean Dolan. RMA was one of the teams hired by the city to guide the process of revising the city’s charter.

“The next step after this vote is to once again issue the comprehensive plan as amended to the state, look at the changes made between first and second reading to make sure it is in compliance with the law and at that point the amendments become effective,” said Dolan, who expects the state will reply no later than May 1.

“It was always about getting the right plan for the city,” Mayor Vallejo said. “This is really bringing the city into the 21st century.”
The next city council meeting will be held at 7:30 p.m. April 7, at City Hall, 17011 NE 19th Ave.