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Public mostly OK with vision of city's future

Planners hold public hearing on revised comprehensive plan

Two years ago to the date, the city's Planning Commission held a hearing on a possible warehouse facility coming to Gore and Ashton roads. More than 100 people attended that meeting to protest the plan.

The mass opposition caused the commission to turn down the company and made it clear the city's comprehensive plan needed to be updated.

Two years later, on Wednesday, the commission approved an update to the comprehensive plan after a hearing about 20 people attended, with no one speaking in opposition of the plan or its updated land uses.

"We had to think about what we envisioned Morris to be in the future," Mike Hoffman, city planner with Teska Associates, said.

The resulting update was driven by two online public surveys the city conducted. The plan outlines what the city foresees in the next 20 years for its land use, transportation plan, open space, facilities, policies, design and future implementation.

Some residents from subdivisions surrounding Gore and Ashton roads came Wednesday to see what the commission changed regarding land use around their neighborhoods. In 2008, residents signed a petition against a 3-million-square-foot warehouse facility coming mostly because of fears of increased truck traffic.

The commission made the surrounding areas commercial near existing uses, such as Menards along Gore Road; low-density residential west along Ashton Road; and limited industrial on the southeast side of the intersection, where the warehouse facility was once looking.

Limited industrial is a new zoning classification approved after a second hearing Wednesday. It is hoped to be used as a buffer zone between residential, commercial and industrial land uses, city attorney Scott Belt said.

Lot sizes could only be between 1 and 5 acres, requiring smaller uses such as offices, greenhouses, self-storage facilities, auto shops, hotels or recreation centers.

A large warehouse could no longer build neighboring the once-concerned subdivisions.

"The types of uses envisioned have reduced volume of traffic," Belt said. "(Reducing) truck traffic to a large extent . . . I'd venture to say we'd be dealing with more delivery trucks and that style with this zoning."

No one commented on this new zone looking to be used off of Gore and Ashton, but one Fields of Saratoga resident, who protested the warehouse facility, said before the meeting she would still rather it be residential.

"I understand we're next to Ritchie Brothers, but it concerns me that they're possibly putting more industrial in so close to residential," Karen Zelko said. "It's not just Fields of Saratoga affected, but also Rockwell Estates and Deer Ridge. I'd rather see it low-density residential."

During the public comments, Zelko thanked the commission for their work on the updated comprehensive plan.

Setting Priorities

The handful of comments that were made publicly were all in appreciation of the commission's time and effort, and some asked the commission and the city to prioritize some of the implementation suggestions.

"You're really never done with a comprehensive plan. It is a living document," Hoffman said.

The comprehensive plan's chapter on implementation suggests the city works ahead on numerous things, including making boundary agreements with its neighboring communities, such as Seneca, Mazon and Lisbon; updating its zoning ordinance and getting specific on parking regulations, buffering standards and plan development regulations; monitoring variance requests; and reviewing the comprehensive plan yearly to keep up to date on what is working and what is not.

"I think it is a great idea to stick a couple of those on the high priority basis," said Morris resident Ralph Wolter.

Wolter said he worried about Seneca coming in and claiming the Nettle Creek area as part of its boundaries. He also worried about Joliet getting to land north of the Morris Municipal Airport before Morris does.

Transportation Plan

The updated transportation plan now outlines possible bike paths and numerous connector roads, Hoffman said.

Of those who commented, many were excited to see the city preparing for future development, rather than waiting for the development to come first.

“Particularly the roads north of Interstate 80 and the northwest corner,” said Morris resident Jim Baum. “That holds the key to good or bad development.”

The transportation plan shows new roads connecting Illinois 47 to Lisbon Road, Lisbon to Ashton, and Ashton to Saratoga Road to take traffic off of Gore Road. That connecting road would connect at Illinois 47 and Prologis Parkway, an already existing road.

It could also connect east of Illinois 47, all the way to the proposed Brisbin Road interchange on Interstate 80. Hoffman said if the Prairie Parkway does get built, the city would like to see a Brisbin Road interchange.

Another road is also outlined south of Saratoga School, from Illinois 47 to connect with Ashton and Gore. The plan also outlines a possible Saratoga Road interchange on I-80.

The comprehensive plan also highlights a concentration on community design, which includes cleaning up Morris’ gateway or “front door” – Illinois 47 from I-80. This includes landscaping and entrance enhancements, private property improvements, and bridge enhancements.

“I love the section on gateways. It’s a nice idea to do something so we don’t look like all the other towns. With the new city hall on 47, I think that is a reason to concentrate on that,” Baum said.

At the earliest, the comprehensive plan will go to city council for approval March 15, Belt said, but it could be a later date. The plan is available for viewing online at www.morris2030.com.

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