



To: City of Whitewater Common Council and Plan and Architectural Review Commission
From: Mark Roffers, AICP, City Planning Consultant
Date: March 11, 2009
Re: REVISED Potential Neighborhood Preservation Approaches to Implement Central Area Plan Policy

Background Information

Part of the recent process associated with the up-zoning of 36 properties in the Tratt Street area to R-3 Multi-Family Residential involved adopting several text amendments to the City's Central Area Plan. One such amendment is a revised policy related to how the City intends to promote the preservation or restoration of a predominately single-family, owner-occupied land use pattern in other neighborhoods in the City. This policy reads as follows:

“Ideally in cooperation with the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and private providers of student housing, the City will engage in a focused effort to identify neighborhoods in the City that are appropriate for future student-oriented housing, as well as those neighborhoods that should be preserved or restored as predominately owner-occupied, single-family neighborhoods. Existing non-student and low-student residential areas should be protected from intrusions from more intensive land uses. In these non-student and low-student areas, the existing character of the area (building size, height, architectural style; lot coverage; setbacks; buffering; use intensity; non-family household sizes; parking; landscaping; etc.) should be preserved; a comprehensive program to restore student-oriented rental housing to owner-occupied single family housing should be pursued; and conversions of existing single-family, owner-occupied housing to student-occupied and/or multiple family housing should be discouraged.”

To move towards implementing this revised policy, at the Plan Commission public hearing on the Central Area Plan amendments, the City Manager asked the City Attorney and me to investigate options for a neighborhood preservation/restoration program elsewhere in the City. Further, the Plan Commission asked me to summarize a range of potential approaches for preserving and restoring single-family, owner-occupied neighborhoods in appropriate areas of the City. It is anticipated that preferred strategies will also be incorporated into the City's Comprehensive Plan, which will be prepared later this year.

The list of strategies described below has been updated since it was first prepared in November of 2008 to reflect new ideas presented by Plan Commission members and City staff.

Potential Neighborhood Preservation Strategies

The following represents a brief outline of some approaches – including education, incentives, neighborhood improvements, and regulations – that may be combined to form an overall strategy for neighborhood preservation. The following list is by no means exhaustive, and I welcome other ideas. In short, the following preliminary list is intended to serve as a starting point for the City Council, and Plan and Architectural Review Commission, and others to begin a more detailed discussion regarding various approaches and to help guide additional investigation.

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1. Define and limit rezonings in “Neighborhood Preservation Areas.” Through public input and research on the conditions in various neighborhoods in the City, the City could designate certain neighborhoods in the City that have a solid single family, owner-occupied housing base as “Neighborhood Preservation Areas.” These designations could be shared with the community for an educational value, and serve as a basis for many of the other approaches for consideration that are listed below.
2. Help convert two-family or multi-family buildings back to single-family homes. Encourage the conversion of homes in “Neighborhood Preservation Areas” that are being used as two-family or multi-family residences back to single-family homes.
3. Offer home buyer assistance. Sponsor or collaborate on low-interest loans and/or down-payment assistance for first-time home buyers to buy and rehabilitate homes in “Neighborhood Preservation Areas” or possibly elsewhere.
4. Encourage conversion of renter-occupied homes to owner-occupancy. Within Neighborhood Preservation Areas, provide incentives for homes formerly being used for rental housing to be upgraded and sold for owner occupancy.
5. Encourage rental properties in designated “Neighborhood Preservation Areas” to be rented to families, or non-student residents. This could potentially also be linked with property owner requested rezonings (to R-3) of properties in other parts of the City.
6. Limit residential density and household size increases in “Neighborhood Preservation Areas.” This could focus on not entertaining “upzoning” of these areas to R-3 or conversions of single family units to duplexes or multiple family units.
7. Consider down-zoning of certain neighborhoods. There are one or two predominately single-family, owner-occupied neighborhoods in the City that nevertheless have been zoned R-3 for a number of years. One approach may be to analyze such areas and consider rezoning all or parts of them to R-1 or R-2, for example. Another approach may be to limit the number of unrelated persons in non-family households to three in R-3 zoned lands that are also in designated “Neighborhood Preservation Areas.”
8. Invest in neighborhood improvements. Improvements in infrastructure, lighting, landscaping/street trees, signage, parks, and trails can help elevate the appearance of a neighborhood, lead to additional private investments in housing, and make the neighborhood more attractive for home owners and buyers.
9. Encourage the establishment of new neighborhood associations and promote the activities of existing associations. The City currently has one neighborhood association called the Historic Starin Park Neighborhood Association (area bounded by Prairie, Main, Fremont and Starin Road) and a second association is in the process of forming for the South Campus Neighborhood (area roughly bounded by Walworth, Janesville, Prairie and Main Streets). Neighborhood associations can strengthen communication between the City and the residents of a neighborhood, increasing the likelihood that issues will be raised and addressed in an organized and effective manner. Neighborhood associations can also bring residents together to resolve problems, ensure that a higher level of attention is paid to each individual neighborhood in the City, and generally result in better managed and maintained neighborhoods.
10. Work to reduce student housing demand in (significantly) off-campus areas. This approach would likely involve close collaboration with UW-Whitewater, and may involve upgrading and increasing on-campus and near-campus housing. Techniques like significantly increasing the cost and availability of on-campus student parking may also discourage cross-town living of students.
11. Consider various approaches to upgrade homes to make them neighborhood friendly. Encourage aesthetic improvements to homes, or stricter maintenance of homes, though a variety of

approaches, regardless of who lives in them. Ideas may include assigning an even higher priority to code enforcement (particularly in Neighborhood Preservation Areas), prohibiting the placement of certain types of furniture intended for indoor use (e.g., couches) outside the house, limiting the conversions of garages to living spaces, or limiting the conversion of backyard spaces for large parking lots or significant building expansions.

12. Modify residential bulk standards to ensure that tear-downs or home additions are consistent with the size and character of the surrounding neighborhood. The City could revise or create bulk standards (e.g., height, setbacks, floor area, lot coverage, or even building volume) for some or all residential zoning districts to ensure that homes that are expanded or rebuilt within existing neighborhoods are not considerably larger than other surrounding homes. A related approach may also involve placing limits on backyard parking lots in certain neighborhoods.
13. Develop a zoning approach to regulate building additions. Additions in which the owner intends to add rooms and spaces that could significantly transform the function of a single-family home, such as installing a second kitchen and/or adding on several more bedrooms, could be more closely regulated. Approaches may include requiring a conditional use permit for certain types of additions or more clearly defining what constitutes a “single-family home” or not.
14. More clearly and obviously present the City’s current non-family household limits in the zoning ordinance. The City’s regulations regarding the maximum size of non-family households (no more than 3 persons in R-1 and R-2 and no more than 5 persons in R-3) are currently located in a somewhat difficult to find section of the zoning ordinance, which means that many property owners may not even be aware of these regulations. This may increase enforcement challenges. Moving or repeating these standards in residential district regulations section of the code could be one strategy for achieving better awareness of these requirements.
15. Distribute notices to the owners of all rental properties in the City reminding them of the City’s requirements on the maximum size of non-family households. The City recently enacted a rental property registration ordinance, which means that the City now has an up-to-date database of all rental properties in Whitewater. Using this list, the City could send a notice to all owners of rental properties reminding them of the regulations governing the maximum size of non-family households in the various residential zoning districts. As mentioned above, ensuring that property owners are aware of these rules may help cut down on enforcement issues.
16. Consider reductions in the number of unrelated people allowed per unit. The City currently allows up to three unrelated individuals to occupy a dwelling unit in the R-1 and R-2 districts, and up to five unrelated individuals to occupy a dwelling unit in the R-3 district. The City could consider reducing these numbers either city-wide, within certain zoning districts, or within certain neighborhoods (Neighborhood Preservation Areas).

Recommendation

No formal action is required at this time. However, we are interested in the Commission’s and Council’s thoughts on what strategies should be researched and pursued further. We have a “voting/ranking” exercise planned for Monday night to help identify which strategies should be investigated further.
