

Commission moves to curb 'granny units'

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An ordinance to give Watsonville control over "granny" rental units, some of which are being misused, was unanimously approved last night by the Planning Commission.

Granny units, which are small attached or free-standing dwellings on the property of larger houses, are allowed under a 1981 state law authored by state Sen. Henry Mello, D-Watsonville. The idea was to create an arrangement under which elderly people could live independent lives near their families, planner John Mahaney said.

What has been happening in some cases in Watsonville, however, is that the use changes when the elderly occupants die or move, or the property is sold, he said.

"The temptation to use it as a rental becomes very great," Mahaney said, "and that creates some problems for the city."

Higher densities, increased traffic and a shortage of parking have resulted when the units are rented to families or other groups exceeding the one or two elderly people they were meant for, he said.

While the proposed ordinance in many ways reflects state law, it places additional restrictions on use of the granny units to maintain the quality and character of neighborhoods.

For example, the ordinance limits occupancy of the units to two people, at least one of whom must be 60 years old. It also restricts the size of a granny unit to 640 square feet, with no more than one bedroom.

Mahaney said the ordinance applies only to areas zoned single-family residential because that's where most of the applications for such units occur. Areas zoned for higher densities already permit multiple units in any case.

As Planning Commission Chairman Nat Bua pointed out, however, granny units are not likely to proliferate because the ordinance restricts them to lots of at least 12,000 square feet.

"So, really, we're not talking about a lot of granny units in the city of Watsonville," Bua said.

In other matters, the Planning Commission approved a proposed 31-lot housing development at Madison Street and Crestview Drive, and a cheese-smoking operation in a Freedom Boulevard warehouse.

In voting for the housing project — known as The Highlands — commissioners overruled a staff recommendation for denial of the project on grounds that the rights-of-way for some of the proposed streets are too narrow.

Marcela Tavantzis, an engineer with the city Public Works Department, explained that while the actual street widths would meet city standards, a right-of-way 12 feet narrower than the 50-foot standard would mean building sidewalks on private property.

The narrower width is normally only allowed in subdivisions where homeowners' associations maintain the sidewalks, she said.

Assistant Planning Director Doug Spinelli said the city

could run into difficulties trying to repair sidewalks on private property. The infringement of the sidewalks on the 5,000- to 5,700-square-foot lots is itself a concern as well, he said.

Commissioners decided to go along with the project, however, when a representative of the developer, JMH Inc., proposed granting easements to the city for the portion of the sidewalks on private property. The representative described the project as "a very beautiful community where the homes are extraordinary," with extensive landscaping, including timed irrigation systems.

Said Commissioner Charles Reinhart, "I would much prefer this rather than a lot of row houses up there that will be slums in 20 years."

Commissioners voted unanimously to approve the project, with a list of conditions, including granting of the easements.

Olsen Brothers Smoked Cheese, a 75 percent wholesale, 25 percent retail cheese-smoking operation proposed for 771 Freedom Blvd., was given

approval for a seven-month trial, running through the Christmas season.

Most of the cheese cut, smoked and wrapped at the warehouse would be sold to wholesalers and through the mail in gift boxes, said Carl Olsen, who would run the operation with his brother, Donald Olsen.

Mahaney called the proposed operation "a unique business." None like it exists in the city, he said, although meats are smoked at Watsonville Lockers in the city and Freedom Lockers and Corralitos Market outside the city.

Objections were raised by Erle Byer, a property owner in the neighborhood, who said the operation would be incompatible with the residential and professional-office character of the area, and that traffic would increase on the already heavily traveled Freedom Boulevard.

Commissioners decided that a seven-month trial would be the answer. They voted 6-1 in favor of the use permit, with Commissioner Luis DeLaCruz casting the dissenting vote.