

Ric and Emily Harned, La Crosse

I and my wife oppose the proposed change of zoning for the property located at 212 11th St. S.

We believe this zoning change, if passed by city council, will negatively impact the neighborhood revitalization efforts that have produced positive changes to our neighborhood.

We have supported neighborhood revitalization efforts that started more than 20 years ago, which recognized the need for zoning protection for neighborhoods. Beginning with the 2002 Neighborhood Revitalization Commission and Comprehensive Plan, a Washburn Neighborhood zoning overlay was created as one strategy to protect the neighborhood from further erosion of its residential fabric and to encourage conversion of properties back to owner-occupied properties.

REACH is seeking TND rezoning to help them move forward with their future development vision and expansion. In reality, the actualization of their vision will come at the expense of the current zoning protection promoting neighborhood revitalization. It also is in opposition to the 2040 comprehensive plan that identifies future commercial, industrial and institutional use as undesirable for the neighborhood as indicated on page 36. Begs the question: why expand that current use in the neighborhood if it is deemed undesirable by La Crosse's Comprehensive plan?

The Washburn Neighborhood zoning overlay had a vision as well – to create a path for properties with the neighborhood to revert to owner occupied. La Crosse's 2002 Comprehensive plan recognized, "The effort to renew La Crosse's neighborhoods will take many years to complete..." We have seen the slow shift realizing this vision over time.

I have not heard compelling argument from REACH or City planning officials, how the proposed zoning change supports neighborhood revitalization; or, how it supports the city's historic comprehensive planning efforts to preserve low and medium residential density in the Washburn neighborhood. The proposed zoning change to TND, I believe, is counter to both. We oppose this zoning change, not to thwart the good work that the REACH center provides to the community; but, to preserve and encourage the positive contributions that the existing Washburn Residential Zoning overlay has had on the long-term neighborhood revitalization efforts and the city as a whole. We want, and hope, those positive trends continue, however, it appears that those efforts have been forgotten due to changing times.

At a meeting with city planning officials on May 9th at city hall, it was made clear to me that the neighborhood revitalization efforts were not a priority of city planning. The argument for city planning incentivizing owner-occupied properties in neighborhoods, and the benefits that owner-occupied to the city as a whole have been overcome by other city needs, such multi-occupancy housing and efforts like the REACH expansion.

This sends a chilling message to me, and others in my neighborhood, who have invested heavily in the improvement of our properties over the years. Our investment has strengthened the fabric of the city of La Crosse through increased tax revenue, improved housing stock, safety and beautification of our neighborhood. It appears to me that the city has now found a work-around for the zoning protection that incentivized my family to move to La Crosse and invest in the property I live in. The chilling message is this: that the city believes REACH expansion, and other efforts that will surely take advantage of the zoning change precedent, is more important to the long range vision and improvement of La Crosse than the efforts of owner occupied residents in historically struggling neighborhoods.

It also appears to me that the decision to approve the REACH zoning change was already supported by the city before I and my neighbors were aware of the issue. The neighborhood residents were not made aware of the proposed REACH expansion, nor engaged by REACH officials, until the current zoning law required them to do so.

I understand city officials have to balance the many issues in the governance of the City of La Crosse, it is a difficult task and I applaud them for their efforts. The REACH zoning decision is just one of the many issues they have to manage.

As a homeowner, it is discouraging to me, that there has not been acknowledgement by the city, other than by Councilwoman Kahlow, that neighborhood improvement, or revitalization has been a concern throughout this whole journey. I have made remarks at two common council meetings that it is unclear how the REACH zoning change proposal supports neighborhood revitalization. I brought up the same concern at the 9 May meeting with city planning officials, who again, offered no acknowledgement that this was a concern in the zoning proposal.

Some of my neighbors (not all) and myself have been strong advocates to preserve and improve our neighborhood, including: safety, neighborhood watch, property improvements; plus opposition to high density housing development and other developments like the REACH zoning change proposal, that we believe are inconsistent with historical and current city planning (documents) aimed at helping neighborhoods remain neighborhoods. As one city councilman expressed in a recent council meeting that some of the residents in my neighborhood have a history of opposing city endorsed proposals for the neighborhood. I am one of the residents who is guilty of that accusation. I will advocate for the 25 years of investment in my property, my neighbors, my neighborhood and the City of La Crosse.

The proposed REACH zoning change, if approved, would remove the one concrete protection that prevents business and high-density housing expansion in the neighborhood. The Washburn Neighborhood is recognized historically as disproportionately burdened with businesses and high-density housing. The Washburn Zoning Overlay was one of many initiatives to help reverse this density, incentivize owners to locate in the neighborhood and invest in the neighborhood as we have over the past 25 years.

My wife and I decided to invest in the home we live in because we believed, 25 years ago, that the City of La Crosse was committed to helping improve the neighborhood. There were financial incentives for owners to make improvements to properties, neighborhoods and neighbors were encouraged to work together for safety, and the zoning law incentivized conversion properties to owner occupied. The city recognized, then, that some neighborhoods needed help in revitalizing.

That was then.

I believe that if this proposed zoning change is approved, it will incentivize additional businesses and developers to take advantage of this precedence. If a TND was approved for the REACH proposal, how can the city deny future requests of a similar nature? The REACH proposed zoning change will further erode protections for prospective homeowners seeking to invest in La Crosse.

It will incentivize them to look elsewhere where they know their investments will be protected.

Respectfully,
Ric and Emily Harned
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