

New housing ordinances coming to Northside

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Editor

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Change — it's something the Northside neighborhood has grown accustomed to over the years.

On Feb. 8, the Chapel Hill Town Council approved ordinances that would create more changes in the historic Chapel Hill community. These changes include improving the affordability of homes in the neighborhood.

The ordinances also raised concerns about enforcement issues with student renters.

Mayor Pam Hemminger said the timing of these ordinances was crucial, as students are beginning their housing search for the fall semester. "The main goal is safety and enough housing for everyone," she said.

Judy Johnson, principal planner for planning and sustainability for Chapel Hill, said staff met with residents, property owners and the Planning Commission over the past several months on this initiative and presented three ordinances to the Town Council for approval.

The first ordinance, the Northside Neighborhood Conservation District Plan, is meant to preserve the history and charm of Northside, while promoting diversity, affordability and community interaction. Similarly, the second ordinance for the Pine Knolls Conservation District aims to preserve the "character of a particular, older residential neighborhood." The third ordinance sought to increase the floor area of single-family homes to up to 2,250 feet in the Northside and Pine Knolls Conservation Districts.

The Neighborhood Conservation Districts are a set of land regulations that are applied to specific neighborhoods as an overlay zoning district. The Town of Chapel Hill has nine NCDs that regulate physical design but cannot regulate noise, ownership, affordability, sidewalks or streets in the neighborhood.

Neighborhood trends

- Northside homeownership rates fell from 28 to 21 percent from 2000 to 2010.
- Students are 55 percent of renters in Chapel Hill.
- The number of African-American residents has nearly been cut in half in the past 30 years.



Judy Johnson presents the Neighborhood Conservation District amendments to the Chapel Hill Town Council. The council approved changes that would affect the affordability and energy efficiency of the homes in Northside and Pine Knolls. (Staff photo by Janell Smith)

In 2012, the Council approved a six-point community plan that included affordable housing, cultural and historic preservation, enforcement, education and outreach, parking and zoning.

Student renters

Because of state legislation that eliminates the local governments' ability to regulate design elements for one- and two-family homes, enforcement issues have underpinned the need for these ordinances. Student renters tend to violate Chapel Hill's occupancy rule, which restricts the number of unrelated occupants in one house to four people.

Delores Bailey, executive director of Empowerment Inc., said enforcement is critical. "It's not fair," she said. "I live at 203 N. Graham Street; I still hear the parties. Not only do I hear the noise from just the parties now — if you'll remember the arcade is on North Graham Street — I hear that all night long as well."

From overcrowding to displacing students, Bailey said what's happening in Northside is a burden for the neighborhood. "There has got to be, again, some relief for the neighborhood."

Bailey said she wants the community to figure out how to solve these issues without penalizing students, while still holding landlords responsible.

Hudson Vaughn, deputy director of the Marian Cheek Jackson Center, said structural changes have helped reduce these housing violations and have made renters better neighbors.

"The [state]-mandated changes are unfortunate because the design has had a huge positive impact," Vaughn said.

Vaughn mentioned one house that had six violations, four in one year. He said that other nearby houses, built after the community plan and redesign, housed students without any disruptions to the neighborhood.

"The collective efforts are working, and I hope we can stay that course," Vaughn added.

Community preservation

Zachary Kopkin, coordinator for organizing and advocacy at the Jackson Center, said the Center has become a prime vehicle in preserving the Northside neighborhood. To celebrate the neighborhood's history and diversity, the Jackson Center has collected hundreds of oral histories over the years.

"I think that's kind of the beauty of it, too," Kopkin said about the oral histories and neighborhood. "There isn't one story, and the community members only want to be neighbors. They want the students here."

The future of the Northside Neighborhood Conservation District partially depends on the town's ability to enforce its housing ordinances and maintain an orderly and family-oriented neighborhood. The town has hired two new enforcement officers, which was a welcomed change.

Council members also suggested strengthening the relationship between community members and UNC-CH students, increasing students' awareness of consequences of violations and implementing more proactive enforcement policies.