

Carrboro Alderman allow InterFaith Council to apply for permit

New amendment allows IFC to apply for land use permit for its FoodFirst facility

By **Janell Smith**
Editor

Compassionate Carrboro.

That was one of the buzzwords residents used to describe the Inter-Faith Council for Social Service's food pantry in downtown Carrboro at the Board of Aldermen's public hearing on March 22.

The public hearing was held as part of the city's rezoning process, which would allow social services like IFC to provide meals to the community.

In a unanimous vote at the end of a three-and-a-half hour public hearing, the board passed a text amendment, which would allow the IFC to apply for a conditional land use permit. If granted the permit, the organization could build their FoodFirst facility in the heart of downtown at 110 W. Main Street and provide meals to Carrboro's hungry, homeless and in-need.

While the meeting was crucial for establishing next steps, it also called into the question the essence of Carrboro.

"What we want our community to be?"

LeAnn Brown, IFC's attorney, emphasized how the conditional land use is a part of Carrboro's culture.

"Conditional zoning is a flexible tool that allows you to take an application on an individual basis; allows you to have meaningful conversations with citizens in a legislative capacity," she said. "We thought the CZ tool would be the perfect opportunity for us to work on the project in a Carrboro way."

Tom Munk, a Carrboro resident who was perhaps one of the briefest speakers of the night, spoke critically about the tensions between the IFC and FoodFirst.

"I am not afraid of attracting homeless people to my community. I'm afraid of attracting heartless people to my community," said Tom Munk.



Vicky Kim, resident of Carrboro and IFC volunteer, hands out buttons and informs residents about the IFC's mission before the Carrboro Board of Aldermen public hearing on March 22. (Staff Photo by Janell Smith)

He explained his fears of what Carrboro could be if the city did not work together to address the larger issues of food insecurity, poverty and homelessness.

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Tim West, a long-time Carrboro resident who is in favor of the FoodFirst facility, spoke to that fear of Carrboro becoming inhospitable to community members experiencing hunger and homelessness.

"One thing I most like about my hometown is there is a very clear, communal commitment to kindness and compassion," he said. "We Carrbororites deeply respect each other as human beings, regardless and often because of our differences. And this shows in town policies and procedures."

Brown, Munk and West were among the nearly 40 community members who spoke before the Aldermen during the three-hour public hearing in Carrboro Elementary School's auditorium.

What about the business owners?

But not all who were in attendance were ready to pass the amendment. Meg Holton, whose family has owned property in Carrboro since the 1960s, said she is concerned about FoodFirst's potential impact.

"The question is, for everyone, 'How do we make this all work,'" she said. "How do we help the IFC clients become independent and self-sufficient? How do we provide the services needed and fit this into a vibrant, livable, walkable community?"

Questions similar to these prompted both public and private meetings about FoodFirst, in addition to garnering the signatures of more than 60 business owners who expressed concern about

building the FoodFirst facility in downtown Carrboro.

Matt Neal, the owner of Neal's Deli, signed the letter and said if he knew then what he knows now he probably would not have signed it.

"I really like the IFC and the people that work there," he said, "I'm really having a good time getting to know them and getting to know more about this proposal."

Neal said he donated \$100 to the IFC last fall through his business, but it was a sacrifice he's not sure he can always give.

"I really like the new leader and I really like the board, but I have concerns about you know the how, the when and all that kind of stuff. It doesn't mean that I'm trying to kick the IFC and poor people and hungry people out of town."

Neal was one of the few business owners to speak out at the meeting. Alderman Jacquelyn Gist took note of it and shared her disappointment that many of those business owners were not at the meeting to share their concerns, particularly because they had been threatened with boycotts.

"I think that's really, really sad," she said. "I would encourage all of you, whether you're for or against our moving forward, to go to Carrboro businesses tomorrow and tell them that you

respect them regardless of their stance on this."

Amy-Jae Crawford, co-owner of Syd's Hair Shop and a former neighbor of the IFC, said that most people expected her business to have trouble with the IFC, or, rather, that most businesses would not support the IFC.

But that wasn't her experience.

"Being neighbors with the IFC created a chance to face fear, press stereotypes and replace them with true experience and human interaction. I have been personally enriched by this," Crawford said.

Crawford added that none of her clients ever felt unsafe, though security was another cause for concern at the public hearing.

What happens next?

The text amendment included language that would require a security management system.

Alderman Sammy Slade, as well as some community members, requested that this language be removed from the amendment.

Additionally, Alderman Randee Haven-O'Donnell said that such language allowed for panhandling ordinances that marginalized particular members of the community and wanted to avoid that through comprehensive

planning.

"Back in October and November I talked about concerns for the language in the ordinance, in terms of how people are viewed," Haven-O'Donnell said. "I was very concerned then and I'm very concerned now. I stand with Sammy and others in regards to extracting the language about the security cameras because, just as I said then, I find that offensive."

The board eliminated this security measure.

While there was concern for businesses, safety and maintaining the aesthetic of Carrboro, Rev. Nathan Alan Hollister, a Carrboro resident, was one of the last speakers to emphasize that the Carrboro he wants to have is one in which all residents are fed and housed before the board voted.

"I think it's odd that we need to pass an amendment because these areas are already zoned for people who want to give away food for money," he said.

In a 7 – 0 vote, the board passed the text amendment. But the approval of the text amendment is just one small victory for the IFC and its supporters. Next, the IFC has to apply for a conditional use permit, a time-consuming process that involves more advisory board reviews, public hearings and community meetings.