

City OKs Mixed-Use High-Rise

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HARRISONBURG — City Council approved a request Tuesday to build a six-story mixed-use building with residential and commercial space on Reservoir Street and Foley Road after discussing whether there is a need for more student housing in the city.

The request for the building comes from Kathy Hite, whose representative is Madison Lucy Realty LLC, which is seeking to rezone two parcels

and obtain three special-use permits for the project.

Voting in favor of the four requests was Mayor Deanna Reed and Councilmen Richard Baugh and Chris Jones. Voting against was Sal Romero and George Hirschmann.

Following a presentation on the development, Jones said he has heard a lot of talk about college residents in an objectifying and belittling way, and he finds it disturbing.

He said the city has many successful businesses because of college students and tourism dollars brought in because of their families.

With Reservoir Street being one of the busiest streets in the city, according to Jones, it makes sense to build a mixed-use building where Hite requested.

“Homebuyers know what streets are busiest when they buy them, Reservoir being one of them,” he said. “This will provide walkability, bikability and bring a dense population of people in one area, which will put less traffic on the roads.”

According to information submitted by the applicant, the proposed building would have around 10,800 square feet of commercial and professional space on the first floor. The upper floors would feature five one-bedroom, five two-bedroom and 90 four-bedroom apartments along with a pool, gym, lounge, study room and bike storage.

Hirschmann said he has talked to people who live nearby, and “I just think it’s a shame sometimes when people have a neighborhood they’re comfortable in and then you disrupt it.”

He said he doesn’t think

the city needs more student housing when the student population is decreasing.

Romero agreed with Hirschmann, saying he has yet to see a tool to help the city figure out the real need for student housing.

“My greatest concern is that we are limited in inventory in the city as far as land we can use to create these opportunities for first-time homebuyers,” he said. “I believe we are losing a big opportunity. I have yet to see anything that we have done to address affordable housing.”

Romero said council has control over how the city grows, and members should be more intentional about it.

Baugh pointed out that under the existing zoning, which is medium density residential, “townhouses could be built on the property by-right, which could also be filled with college students. We aren’t in the business of telling people who to rent to, and that’s a good thing,” he said. “The comprehensive plan says this is a good area for mixed-use because its R-3.”

He said by approving the request, the development “would be our biggest driver to promote affordable housing.”

He said the new housing, which would most likely go to the “top end of the JMU market,” would put the existing student housing on the

market for apartments to be rented out to working families.

Reed said she looks to the comprehensive plan, which Planning Commission and council updated last year. The request aligns with the plan.

“If student housing is an issue, it needs to be addressed in the comprehensive plan,” she said. “Let’s be respectful of students because they’re half of our population. We need to figure out how to live together.”

She said she is fed up with people saying “we don’t want students there” because they have a right to live in all city neighborhoods.

Jones also said he finds it odd that Planning Commission would approve the comprehensive plan but oppose the requests.

Planning Commission unanimously recommended denial of three of the requests, only supporting a special- use permit to allow for non-residential uses.

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