



PLANNING AND ZONING

Cerro Gordo County Courthouse

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=TO: Cerro Gordo County Planning and Zoning Commission

FROM: John Robbins

SUBJECT: Next Meeting – *Thursday, March 5, 2020; 4:00 p.m.; Boardroom*

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The next meeting of the Cerro Gordo County Planning and Zoning Commission is scheduled for **Thursday, March 5, 2020 at 4:00 p.m., in the Boardroom at the Courthouse.** You will be considering one rezoning request.

1. Cerro Gordo County west of 17262 Lark Avenue (SE¼, Section 11, Lake Township)

This is a request to rezone 18.71 acres in the SE¼ of Section 11, Lake Township, from A-1 to A-2 (See Figure 1). This is county-owned land, is part of the old county farm, and is the intended site for a new Cerro Gordo County engineering building. The site is to the west of the Cerro Gordo County Law Enforcement Center (See Figure 2).

The Zoning Ordinance permits city and county buildings and facilities by right in A-2 districts. In other words, a permit can be administratively granted by the Zoning Administrator for city and county buildings and facilities in A-2 districts if all district and general requirements are met. In contrast, the ordinance requires a Special Use Permit for city or county buildings or facilities to be located in an A-1 district.

The land for which the rezoning is requested is located within the area between Mason City and Clear Lake included in the un-adopted “*Developing Common Ground, A Comprehensive Land Use and Transportation Plan for Joint Development*” document developed in 1999. This document is otherwise known as the “HNTB study.”

As one of its “10 Guiding Principles for Development,” this plan encourages regional opportunities, such as public facilities, where all jurisdictions will benefit and emphasizes that new development is contiguous to urban centers and used in ways where financial resources are justified to benefit the community at large. The new engineering building is proposed to be located just outside of the city limits of Mason City and in a centralized location in north Cerro Gordo County that will help to better provide county secondary roads and other services more efficiently.

The current Engineer's Office is located on South Federal Avenue in an armory building that is becoming prohibitively expensive to operate out of and maintain. This location and a new facility will be more efficient to operate and allow the consolidation of several county facilities that will save taxpayer money.

This property is designated as "future development area" by the Future Development Guide Map contained in the HNTB study. The plan did not contemplate imminent development in this area. However, a Corridor Design Overlay District was proposed along the highway. This area would have consistent and "quality" signage, landscaping, and highway access controls. The land on which the law enforcement center is proposed lies beyond this proposed Overlay District.

The County's Comprehensive Plan places this property within the coordination/cooperation area between Mason City and Clear Lake. Since the property is closer to Mason City than Clear Lake, comments have been requested from the Development Services Department. The plan contains numerous objectives and policies applicable to the proposed rezoning. These are listed below:

- Policy 2.1.4 Grant zoning changes only when it can be demonstrated that rezoning will result in community benefit which will outweigh any potential adverse impact upon surrounding properties. Conformance with the goals, objectives, and policies of the Comprehensive Plan and other adopted County plans or ordinances may be used as a basis for demonstrating community benefit.
- Objective 2.3 Encourage the majority of future development to locate within existing cities, or adjacent to existing cities in urban fringe areas planned for annexation, where adequate public services are planned or can be provided.
- Policy 2.4.1 In order to preserve productive agricultural soils and active agricultural areas of the County, non-farm uses should be limited to areas of marginal or poor agricultural soils, where it is least disruptive of existing agricultural activities; where it can be developed in an efficient and compact manner; and where it can be shown that there is a recognized need for such development.
- Objective 3.1 Recognize agricultural land as a principal natural resource of the County, and preserve those agricultural soils that have historically exhibited high crop yields and are considered the most suitable for agricultural production.
- Policy 3.1.1 Discourage development of productive agricultural soils by non-farm uses.
- Policy 3.1.2 Utilize the Corn Suitability Rating (CSR) of 70 to be applied by the County in reviewing development plans and projects, for the preservation of agricultural land areas.
- Policy 3.1.3 Other factors besides CSR may be considered to determine whether agricultural land preservation is appropriate; such as the physical characteristics and topography of the property, the location of the property and the compatibility of surrounding land uses, the land capability classification, and historic yields per acre of the property.
- Objective 10.1 Establish a system for planning purposes which will evaluate the costs and benefits of necessary County facilities and services.
- Policy 10.1.2 Provide facilities and services in locations compatible with planned growth areas, uses, populations, and needs.

Policy 10.1.7 Encourage new development to over-size facilities to serve adjacent development when the adjacent development is expected to require services. Developers will be reimbursed for constructing over-sized facilities through appropriate fees or assessments on subsequent users.

Utilities already serve the Law Enforcement Center from Lark Avenue, and it is intended to have the proposed engineering building to also be served from these services. Existing capacity should be in place to meet the demand of the potential new facility, but in the packet sent to the city of Mason City, I have requested that they comment on this aspect as well. There is an existing agreement with the city of Mason City for utilities from the time when the Law Enforcement Center was built. It appears that this agreement was intended to address potential future development on the county-owned land within the area bounded by Lark Avenue, 263rd Street, Kingbird Avenue, and Iowa Highway 122 (265th Street), which includes potential annexation into the city. While the applicability of the agreement for this particular facility may need to be worked out with the city, these factors address Objective 2.3 and Policies 10.1.2 and 10.1.7

This is land that has been in agricultural production for decades as confirmed by historical aerial photography. The whole of the area has a CSR rating of 77-78, which is above the rating of 70 raised by Policy 3.1.2 and considered highly productive land. Several of the objectives and policies discourage taking productive soils out of production.

The balance of the remainder of objectives and policies weigh community benefits, costs, and the nature of development location and scale. One of the reasons that this site was chosen is because the county already owns it. There were no property acquisition costs, thus lowering the overall cost of the project. Secondly, the site offers opportunity for expansion. Third, the use is consistent with the scale of other nearby buildings such as Country Meadow Place assisted living and the Law Enforcement Center. The scale is also consistent with the agricultural nature of the area. Fourth, the location is centralized in the north part of the county with excellent access to major transportation facilities such as Interstate 35, US Highway 18, and Iowa Highway 122 to traverse the county, allowing several existing County Engineer facilities to be consolidated to improve efficiency and be more cost effective. The new facility also will create savings on operation and maintenance that the current facility does not provide.

Policy 2.1.4 states that—along with the objectives and policies of the Comprehensive Plan—other plans and ordinances may also be used as a basis for demonstrating community benefit. In the Zoning Ordinance, the purpose of the A-2 District is intended to “serve the agricultural community and guide urban land use development in the rural area.” The primary purpose of the new facility will be to service the roadways of the rural areas of the county in a more efficient and cost-effective manner. The location is in the western urban fringe of Mason City and consistent with the stated purpose of the requested change of zone.

While there is some conflict between the goals of preserving productive agricultural soils and overall community benefits, the characteristics of the proposed project appear to be more supported by the Comprehensive Plan than discouraged by it for the following reasons:

1. The primary purpose of the project is to better serve the agricultural community as a whole.
2. The benefits and cost savings of a more efficient county engineering facility, location, and site consolidation outweighs its costs.
3. The location is in the urban fringe and joint cooperation area and is at a scale that is appropriate in a more rural setting, making an A-2 District designation appropriate.

I recommend that the proposed rezoning be forwarded to the Board of Supervisors for approval.