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NB city council votes on residential mixed-use development provisions

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Neptune Beach officials are asking city planners to prohibit residential uses within the commercial zoning district. The City Council Monday cast a unanimous vote directing city staff and consultants Dover, Kohl & Partners to remove all provisions for residential mixed-use development in commercial zoning areas of Neptune Beach.

“We’ve received significant feedback from the public and I’d like to see if there is a consensus on directing staff and the city’s consultants Dover, Kohl & Partners to remove any residential component from the mixed used commercial zoning,” said Mayor Elaine Brown. “Right now, we have an awful lot of people that feel as though that what happened with the old Kmart is being eroded.”

Council members weighed in on the issue, with most echoing the public sentiment that such residential uses would negatively affect the city’s character. Councilor Lauren Key said she received over 50 emails from constituents in opposition of residential uses. “I definitely think it’s the right things to do right now,” she said.

Vice Mayor Fred Jones said while he planned to vote in support of removing the provision, he worried about the future impact of the decision. “I have differing opinions about this. I know certainly there is a perspective that says we should eliminate it. The only concern that I have is

sort of long term. I think in some respects it can handicap the city by explicitly saying that no residential use [is allowed],” he said. “If it’s the will of the folks that we take that out for the plan’s purposes, that’s fine with me. I would disagree personally but it’s your plan so that is the way I’m going to move forward with it.”

Councilor Kerry Chin said he has been outspoken against high-density residential developments and supported the city’s fight to block the plan for apartments at the 500 Atlantic on the former Kmart site. “I’ve been pretty clear that I felt that would drastically change the character of our community so I have no problem with moving forward with this,” he said.

Councilor Josh Messinger was unable to attend the meeting in person, but city officials voted by a show of hands to allow him to participate virtually. Messinger works for a company that is helping the state roll out vaccines statewide which requires him to travel. Virtual participation is only allowed under extraordinary circumstances.

In 2018, Neptune Beach prevailed in a lengthy court battle with developers at Tribridge seeking to build a high-density, mixed-use development at the corner of A1A and Atlantic Boulevard.

Last January, consultants Dover, Kohl & Partners unveiled a \$500,000 vision plan including concepts many citizens felt were too similar to the type of development proposed by Tribridge.

“The vision plan appears to be actually laying a roadmap for mixed use residential development,” said resident David Blais in a recent letter urging citizens to voice their concerns. “Citizens realize the most important part of the vision plan is the land use map. Everything else can be a 'menu approach' but this is critical to protecting our quality of life.”

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