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Historic District Listing and Zoning Issues in the University Neighborhoods

At its May 17, 1999 public meeting, the Community Redevelopment Agency referred the issue of listing the University Area neighborhoods on the Local Register of Historic Places to the City Commission. The CRA's charge was to examine the historic district potential for what is commonly known as the University Heights Neighborhood, an area that extends east of West 13th Street, south of Northwest 4th Avenue, west of Northwest 6th Street, and north of Depot Avenue (see Legislative No. 990146). In addition, staff was to examine the probable conflicts between the high-density residential zoning in the neighborhood and historic district regulations.

Staff found that the University District is a potential Local Register historic district because it is associated with the growth and development of Gainesville as a result of the siting of the University of Florida in the early 1900s. In addition, it is architecturally significant because of the concentration of buildings and structures constructed in familiar national styles characteristic of the 1920s to 1950s. Furthermore, it has a high concentration of buildings constructed in fieldstone, which is Gainesville's most unique contribution to the architectural history of the State of Florida. Finally, the University District is a distinct entity whose component parts may lack individual distinction. The construction period (over fifty years) and the physical integrity of the vast majority of buildings in the University District make it significant.

The existing zoning for the neighborhood, particularly at higher densities, may conflict with the goals of historic preservation. The City has zoned the majority of the University District either RH-1 (20-43 units/acre) or RH-2 (43-100 units/acre) in an effort to intensify development around the University of Florida. Existing development patterns indicate maximum densities of 20-28 units/acre and can be achieved on small parcels by converting single family homes to duplexes and building garage apartments and accessory dwellings. This is a development pattern that would be compatible with historic preservation prescriptions and is consistent with the minimum density set forth in the RH-1 zoning district (20 units/acre). However, it is unlikely the minimum densities can be approached for developments in RH-2 (43 units/acre) without demolition.

Redevelopment of the University District at the densities anticipated by the Comprehensive Plan is affected by dozens of small lots (less than 10,000 sq. ft.2) along with fragmented ownership. Approximately 105 parcels in the district are either substandard or nonconforming, relative to the dimensional requirements of the zoning districts. In those instances where property owners have assembled two or more lots, the vast majority own concentrations of less than one-half acre. Proposed changes to the minimum density requirements will allow developers more flexibility to overcome the difficulties of building on smaller lots for multi-family densities.

At a recent City Commission meeting, the Commission also indicated interest in assisting with protection of historic structures when such structures must be relocated. While relocation of historic structures should always be a last resort, the City Commission may wish to establish a program with modest funding, possibly \$10,000 per fiscal year, for assisting with relocations of historic structures as a last resort.

There would be no fiscal impact for establishing a district. If the Commission wishes to create a program to fund relocation of historic structures, a funding source would need to be identified, and the funds placed in the Historic Preservation Board budget.

The City Commission hear a presentation from staff.