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Hearing of text amendment request on the horizon

Summerfield Planning Board may consider landowner David Couch's request as soon as September
by CHRIS BURRITT

SUMMERFIELD - Debate over landowner David Couch's request to amend Summerfield's development rules is preparing to reignite, starting with discussion by the town's Planning Board as early as September.

Town Manager Scott Whitaker told the board during its July 25 meeting that town staff would be prepared to address Couch's latest text amendment request no sooner than the board's meeting Sept. 28.

That would possibly put the topic before the Town Council Oct. 11. As required by state law, public hearings during the board and council meetings would provide feedback to Summerfield leaders considering Couch's plans for developing 973 acres he owns in the town.

Earlier this year, the council held a separate informational meeting about Couch's previous text amendment request. Such informational meetings aren't required by state law, and one isn't planned during this round of discussions, according to Whitaker.

After speaking with council members individually, he said, "The consensus is they don't want to have the optional information meeting this time."

What's been a hotly debated topic in recent years has been quiet since May when Couch, owner of Summerfield Farms, submitted a new text amendment request.

A month earlier, the council rejected his application to create a new zoning district that would have accommodated his plans for a range of housing, from apartments to luxury homes.

The council's 4-1 vote to deny Couch's request reflected what council member Janelle Robinson described as the opposition of "the overwhelming majority" of Summerfield residents to apartments and higher-density residential development.

To accommodate denser housing, Couch proposed extending water and sewer services to his development, with property owners within the development - not other Summerfield taxpayers - paying for the additional public utilities.

In exchange for clustered, higher-density housing and the absence of septic fields, Couch said he would preserve pastures, woodlands and scenic views on Summerfield Farms and several other tracts where he proposed building 11 villages connected by walking and cycling trails. Less expensive housing such as apartments, townhouses, duplexes and cottages in Summerfield would provide more affordable options for people earning moderate incomes and enable older residents to downsize and remain in the community, according to Couch.

Those are amenities recommended by Summerfield's comprehensive plan, he noted.

In his latest proposal, Couch offered to reduce the number of apartments he wants to build in his planned development, Villages of Summerfield Farms, to 596, which is half of the 1,192 apartments he initially proposed. In response to criticism by some residents and council members, he offered other concessions as well.

After a year and a half of divisiveness among Couch's opponents and supporters, he proposed a collaborative approach in a letter to Whitaker that accompanied his revised text amendment application.

"The intent of this submittal is to open a dialogue with the Town to come to a mutually acceptable pathway for moving forward," Couch wrote in May.

Whitaker told the Planning Board last month that a July 13 meeting between town staff and Couch affirmed the interest by both sides to proceed "cooperatively" with no pressure to rush through the process.

"We are going to have conversations and try to work through this and see if there is any common ground," Whitaker said. "If not, then so be it. But we are going to take the time that is needed because it is that big of a project or potential project for the town."

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