

Understanding The Development Process In Wheat Ridge

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■ By Mike McKibbin

Editor's note: This story is part of a series on growth and development in Wheat Ridge.

Hor Figlus campaigned for a Wheat Ridge City Council seat in 2019 and said he was surprised at the “animosity voiced against the city administration when it came to growth.”

Figlus later helped gather petition signatures to oppose both the 4100 block of Upham Street and 38th Avenue and Johnson Street housing development rezonings.

“There are others that don’t even get to the council, they’re approved administratively by the city planning department,” Figlus added. “That brings up all kinds of things. There’s just a certain amount of dissatisfaction with the city administration.”

Like many communities, projects that meet the city development code are usually approved “by right” in Wheat Ridge. That means they require little to no review by a discretionary body, such as the planning commission. The city code authorizes professional staff to approve such applications.

A city web page lists 18 new housing options since 2010, with 11 of those scheduled to be under construction last year or this year.

Mayor Bud Starker said the city has had a “pretty robust” conversation about recent housing development projects. While the city process is not perfect, Starker added, public hearings on several projects have had a “good deal of comment.”

“A lot of those comments could be grouped into either process questions or project questions,” he said. “I think it’s important we draw that distinction. But I hope however these issues are handled, that we draw to a consensus for the community.”

Zoriana Morozewych also gathered petition

signatures against the 38th and Johnson rezoning. She said city planning staff pays more attention to developers than citizens.

“Neighborhoods want to be involved, so they need to listen to citizens,” she stated.

The city’s Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy 2019 update noted “... the response to neighborhood issues is mostly reactive, which puts city government behind the curve and does not instill resident confidence in the idea the city is on top of things that matter to residents close to their homes.”

Starker pointed to the What’s Up and Let’s Talk Wheat Ridge online comment tools as examples of the city seeking more public input.

“The more voices we hear, the better decisions we can make,” Starker said. “We have a great little city and we’ll always disagree on some issues, but the quality of our debate is good and we try to be as open and transparent as we can.”

But some question the city’s goals with such methods.

“My concern is they already have their agenda and they’re using this listening program to sell it to the public,” Morozewych stated.

“We hope to dispel the notion that the planning department is this ‘black box’ and work toward giving more input into our processes,” said Planning Manager Lauren Mikulak.

Starker said most who feel city council does not listen reach that conclusion because they disagree with the outcome of an issue of interest.

“I know council listens closely to what everyone has to say and they have a true concern over how the city moves forward,” he added.

Opponents to change always have larger vocal presences than those seeking change, Starker noted.

“You always seem to have more people show up to oppose something than to support it and that’s probably because change makes people uncomfortable,” he said. “But it’s good to have those discussions.”

Starker said if someone does not agree with how the city handled an issue, appeal methods are available. Overall, though, Starker said Wheat Ridge is correctly handling housing projects and development.

Zoning and Development Code governs development

Community Development Director Ken Johnstone said the city has only a couple of options for development projects that don’t conform to existing zoning: Planned residential development and mixed-use districts.

Johnstone said most mixed-use projects along the city’s main corridors, such as Wadsworth Boulevard and 38th Avenue, are commonly administratively approved.

“Some people think that’s the way to get around the rules, but that’s not how they’re supposed to be used,” he added. “If a project just isn’t supported by the existing zoning, we need to change the zoning. That’s what we tell the applicants.”

With zoning changes, Johnstone said the city has a public notice requirement of all property owners within a 600-foot radius, along with extra signage. Previously, the city only required notice to adjacent property owners.

In an email, Mikulak noted the city charter caps development at 21 units per acre, while one zone district has a 12-units-per-acre limit, which she said may seem “pretty low, but it feels high to some neighbors” of such projects. Voter approval of a 2009 ballot question designated areas along Wadsworth, Interstate 70 and near the Ward Road transit station as denser, she added.



WESTRIDGE ROWHOMES, south of 44th Avenue on Yarrow Street in Wheat Ridge. Housing projects elsewhere have raised concerns and opposition from some residents.

PHOTO: THRIVE HOME BUILDERS

“At the end of the day, changes are viewed as a threat by some people, but we can control some of that with things like height restrictions and design specifications,” Mikulak said. “We have an open book when it comes to reviewing things like public notices, but we continue to need to diversify the city’s housing stock.”

Economic Development Manager Steve Art noted retail businesses looking to expand or relocate look first at a community’s number of rooftops, or housing units. Household income, age, workforce and educational level are others, he added.

“For example, a restaurant chain wants to know the number of people for potential customers, then if they can afford their products,” Art said.

“In the past, our average income was pretty low, but that has changed for the better with more diverse types of housing. That’s helped the city develop an impressive type and quality of retail businesses.”