

Former Holyoke councilor pushes back on zoning overhaul, citing neighborhood risks

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HOLYOKE — A proposal to alter Holyoke’s business zoning districts is drawing concern from a former city councilor, who says it could allow denser development near homes.

City officials are [reviewing](#) dozens of zonings and special permit changes meant to update outdated rules and encourage development.

[Opponents](#) say the changes move too fast and could shift commercial uses into residential areas.

At a recent [public hearing](#), former City Councilor Helen F. Norris outlined what she called two major concerns with the proposal — the elimination of Business Limited zoning districts and a plan to reduce the council’s role in approving certain special permits.

Trying to drink from a fire hydrant

The city should not convert Business Limited zones to Business General without holding parcel-by-parcel hearings and reviews, Norris told The Republican in an email.

If the city has already reviewed the affected properties, that information should be made public, Norris said.

Many Business Limited parcels, she added, were originally nonconforming uses that were allowed under older rules and were located in residential neighborhoods.

“Expanding the density of usage on these parcels and reducing buffer zones ... is not something I would think most neighbors would welcome,” Norris said.

Norris asked the city to release a clear list of all Business Limited properties, saying the Planning Board’s zoning map is nearly impossible to read.

“We do not need a one-size-fits-all change to the city’s BL-zoned properties,” Norris said.

She urged the city to let property owners petition for a change and, if one is requested, to allow abutters to engage with the city council.

“Do not railroad this proposal to eliminate BL in our city ordinances, as it has the potential to change character of the city’s neighborhoods in one fell swoop,” Norris said.

Norris also said the City Council should retain its authority over certain special permits.

“The rationale given is that the particular zoning matters are too technical for the City Council. Really? My recollection is the Planning Board presented these matters to the City Council, and that is where the buck stopped. That worked. Why change it?” she said.

The Planning Board argues that moving some special permit approvals would reduce the City Council’s workload. Norris called it a loss of democracy framed as efficiency.

“A cynical person might ask what the hidden agenda is,” she added.

She pointed to a past decision in which the City Council gave up its authority to approve contracts longer than three years, clearing the way for privatization of the city’s wastewater

plant. That decision led to what Norris described as a seedy, costly and one-sided 20-year contract with Aquarion and its successors.

When the contract later came up for renewal, the city discovered numerous loopholes that would not have occurred if voters' earlier rejection of privatization had been honored, she said.

"Losing checks and balances is expensive and it also undermines democratic decision making," she said.

Norris, who served 16 years on the City Council's ordinance committee, said the size and scope of the current zoning package also raise concerns.

She said that reviewing 41 separate orders at once is "way too much" for one hearing. "It's like trying to drink from a fire hydrant," she said.

The ordinance committee meets again April 28 but will not take up the zoning proposal that night. The public hearing was continued to May 7, according to Jeffrey Anderson-Burgos, administrative assistant to the City Council.

Mayor responds

Speaking in an interview, Mayor Joshua Garcia said public concern is expected whenever the city considers major changes. Garcia said the proposal is meant to bring clarity and flexibility to a zoning map that no longer reflects how the city has developed.

He said misinformation is common during times of change and encouraged residents to attend hearings, speak with at-large councilors, contact the mayor's office, or talk with Planning Board members for more details.

"What we are trying to achieve is to "right size" the city," Garcia said.

He said some areas of the city have mixed zoning as a result of older designations, which he said have contributed to what is known as spot zoning.

"Other areas in town certain zones that might have made sense during that time period in the eighties that now have evolved and changed," he said.

In Holyoke, some businesses must appear before both the Planning Board and the City Council, a process Garcia said is less common in other communities.

Applicants still need Planning Board approval, but they must also seek a special permit from the council, a step, Garcia said, that can become political. He said the goal is to make the process more efficient.

Garcia said he often hears that the city is not business-friendly or homeowner-friendly, noting that even small projects, such as building a garage, can require multiple approvals depending on the intended use.

"We are trying to create a more practical process where it is more efficient and less restrictive to a point were supporting the process that allows for sensible development without all of the red tape," Garcia said.