



Tuscaloosa Neighborhoods Together

notes on
TUSCALOOSA CITY COUNCIL
May 27, 2008

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The Tuesday city council meeting again turned into one of those expected votes that half the people favored and the other half did not. The first part of the meeting - 19 votes on consent agendas as listed in Monday's Tuscaloosa News all passed with 7-0 votes.

Yard parking: Then followed an expected lengthy parade of citizens commenting on the adoption of an ordinance to amend the text of the Zoning Ordinance concerning front yard parking. First of all, the zoning designations - R-1 is a single family dwelling with large lots and deeper setbacks; and R-2 is smaller lots with less setbacks. Those were the only two zoning designations that this ordinance covered.

The ordinance establishes driveway widths for lots over 45 feet (no wider than 20 feet), but they may be exempt if setbacks are less than 30 feet. Temporary vehicles are allowed in yards on certain occasions. Driveways may be of crushed stone rather than paving if the stone was there before this ordinance passed. The measure will be enforced ON A COMPLAINT BASIS to the Department of Transportation (read Police, who really don't have enough people to drive around and look for these infractions). Exceptions will be made for holidays, funerals, etc.

It was noted that a ban on front yard parking has been in place for some time in the historic districts of the city, there has been no problem there and property values have not been lowered. Councilman Taylor stated that this would put more cars on the street, where there would be no room for fire trucks, ambulances, etc and that it could be a big expense for a lot of people in his District. No city department head is in favor of this ordinance.

Councilman Tyner stated that nine neighborhoods in his District wanted the ordinance and that landlords will have to put driveways in. Cars parking in front yards signals the decline of neighborhoods and lowers property values. Councilman Garrison thanked Planning Committee members Reynolds and Rumsey for the time spent on this. He stated that the R-3 zone is where college kids live and the University is trying to educate the students on parking. More housing in the area will be developed.

The Cedar Crest neighborhood has asked for this ordinance to be passed. Councilman Howard of District 1 said that it will be too much of a hardship and will have to vote against it. Bobby Wilson said the Council is forgetting about people not as fortunate as others - the elderly and others who have medical costs, higher food prices. He also pointed out the fire truck, etc problem and said that while the ordinance will not affect him but will be very difficult for others. He asked that the city enforce the laws on abandoned cars and said that there were many in this area. He then asked the question: "Who is this going to hurt the most?"

Garrison suggested that he get together with the Planning Department and iterated that the ordinance DOES NOT cover all of the city. Planning member Reynolds said that going through his district toward campus, the change is emphatic. Those are overwhelmingly R-3 zones. We must have an opportunity to stabilize neighborhoods, a lot of which were built when there was only one car to a family. He agreed that an ordinance is not workable in R-3 zones.

Jon Anderson of the East Tuscaloosa Neighborhood Association said that there was no problem until about 5 years ago; that the front yard parking is viewed poorly, people move out of the area and that the problem will only get worse if it is not solved now. He asked for the Council's support for the ordinance and said his association had published a pamphlet on desirable neighborhood practices including parks in front yards.

It was pointed out that some people have not been taught manners in this respect and particularly renters who feel no need to keep up the property.

Robert Parsons of the Forest Lake Association said that that Board of Directors was in favor of the ordinance. Garrison said the city could work on alleys and lights behind some of the properties. Marie Thornton of Forest Lake Drive said that most rental houses on her street are messes, that they charge outrageous rental prices, and people like her were left holding the bag. There followed a familiar figure to Council Chambers - Ms. Witt (sp?) who accused the police of lying which was promptly followed by several people vigorously defending the veracity of the police. (What this had to do with the ordinance I don't understand, but I may have missed something - a lot of upraised voices all at one time). Ms. Witt (sic) also stated that it was all about money and not the law.

Another citizen rose up to say that his neighborhood approved the ordinance and that a lot of front yard parking affects property values. It was stated that Glendale Gardens is in the historical District but that Avalon and Hargrove have problems. A Ms Watts (again sp?) was against the ordinance. Her family has grown, her children are older and they need more space in the yard. She said she pays tax on her property and that the city should look after the tax payers. The problem must be worked out with the renters, not everyone. She asked that the rules be fair to homeowners and not be like a dictatorship.

Brock Corder, of the Builders Group of West Alabama and a member of the Planning and Zoning Commission's special committee on this stated that all city department heads opposed this

ordinance and all gave negative feedback. He said without economic exemption this will be a great hardship. George Harris of Forest Lake Neighborhood Association sees this as a compromise - not completely satisfactory but a good first step. The neighborhood has lots of alleys and wants to work with the city on improving this in favor of an ordinance.

Steve Rumsey (developer, rental property owner and Planning and Zoning Commissioner) asked who would enforce this ordinance? Does TDOT work at night? (Ans. NO) He said that most of the time people are at home at night and nobody is on the beat. He also stated that since Katrina, criminals from New Orleans have migrated to Tuscaloosa and that the police have everything they can do to handle this problem. There is no more space in jail for the criminals from New Orleans and there is certainly no space for old ladies who have cars parked in her yard. We cannot teach manners. Parents have to. This money should be utilized to fight the real criminals.

The original vote on this was 5-2, with Howard and Tinker voting no. But Councilman Taylor said his district was split, so he voted for the ordinance because the areas that would be impacted were in favor of its' passage. His yes vote made it possible for him to reconsider if the impact is too severe. Rules of order state that only someone who voted with the majority could call for a reconsideration.

Tuscaloosa Airport: Next on the agenda was ordinances of a general nature, and seven of these were passed 7-0. The exception brought about another loo-oong discussion on amending the city code pertaining to fixed base operations...at the Tuscaloosa Regional Airport. Who knew?? No one seemed to understand the problem, but it turned on the word "incidental" being inserted into the amendment. John Owens represented a company that wanted to relocate at the airport, but wanted the word "incidental" in the ordinance. The Airport Advisory Committee was against this, the city attorney was against it and the FAA is against it, but on went the discussion. Finally a Solomonic decision was reached - even though everyone was confused, to vote for the ordinance on the books and not the amendment, stating that stipulations could be written to the company's lease. (Did you know that the airport is sort of like various unions - radio specialists, tire specialists and all manner of specialists, all having to be licensed by the FAA and NOBODY else had better mess with their specialty. But once the plane you are re-fitting is behind closed hanger doors who knows what those people will do?)