

Heart of Peoria Commission asks to be disbanded

Some members say Heart of Peoria Commission has overstayed welcome

By JOHN SHARP

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PEORIA —

A commission that played a strong role in implementing the first major zoning changes to the city of Peoria since 1991 recommended Friday that it be disband.

With a 5-2 vote, the Heart of Peoria Commission requests the City Council disbands the commission effective Dec. 31.

It also recommended that some of its members not assigned to active city commissions be recommended to Mayor Jim Ardis and the council for placement on a commission such as zoning, planning, traffic, and historic preservation.

Commissioners Bill Washkuhn, Henry Lawrence, Mark Misselhorn, Geoff Smith and Julie Waldschmidt voted in favor of disbanding. Voting against were Beth Akesson and C.J. Summers. Nancy Biggins said she was undecided and declined to vote.

The City Council could vote on the commission's recommendation by Dec. 15.

"Politically, everyone likes to date the new girl on the block. Everyone embraces the new thing," Washkuhn, the commission's chairman, said. "The Heart of Peoria Commission has overstayed its welcome. It has lost its glitter."

A majority of commissioners suggested the group could be best utilized as a private advocacy committee.

They cited a lack of political and financial support from the city as one of the main reasons for disbanding. Also, commissioners pointed out they are scheduled to meet only six times next year and, during the past year, its agenda topics have dwindled.

"It's hard to maintain an energy level when we only go every two months," Washkuhn said. "I don't think we have the clout anymore."

Akeson, however, said the commission's work was not completed. She said if the principles of New Urbanism were important to the city and the City Council, the commission could continue providing advice and recommendations.

"We were supposed to move along and establish policy," Akeson said. "I say we are at the 10 percent mark. We have policy that needs to be implemented. I don't know of a project that meets the spirit of New Urbanism."

The commission was formed in 2004 as a way to generate ideas for revitalizing Downtown Peoria and its outlying bluffs.

The panel played a crucial role in spearheading efforts to get the city's new land development code approved by the City Council in 2007. It was only the fourth major change to the city's zoning code since the original code was established in 1931.

The land development code was considered somewhat revolutionary for the city in that it changed zoning laws within the city's Heart of Peoria area, an 8,000-acre section that generally includes Downtown and the surrounding bluffs.

These changes are aimed at promoting the principles of New Urbanism in making Peoria a more pedestrian friendly environment while strengthening the Heart of Peoria area both economically and socially.

But since the code was adopted, there has been some criticism about the council and other commissions endorsing variances from the new zoning regulations against features such as building designs and street walls.

Washkuhn said the commission will have better luck in the future advocating for New Urbanism ideals if its members reform as a private group.

"We've lost steam," he said. "Every so often, you have to reinvent yourself."

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