

Holyoke hosts 1st of many hearings on major zoning ordinance overhaul Tuesday

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HOLYOKE — A long, “scary” zoning notice raised alarm in Holyoke — but city officials say it wasn’t the final word, just the legally required starting point for an overhaul.

Leaders say the proposal won’t raise taxes, won’t change industrial zoning and is designed to simplify development with ample public input.

The Holyoke City Council’s ordinance committee and the city Planning Board will take up the first parts of the proposed zoning overhaul Tuesday night, opening multiple hearings on a broad package of changes advanced by the board.

The revisions span more than 40 sections of the city’s zoning ordinances and focus largely on technical updates — streamlining special permit processes, clarifying definitions and modernizing zoning districts across the city.

Holyoke Mayor Joshua Garcia, in a statement, said recent zoning notices that caused concern among residents were meant to mark the beginning of a public review process, not a final decision.

Garcia acknowledged concerns about communication but rejected claims that the city has lacked transparency, saying the detailed mailings were legally required to identify affected properties and prompt public engagement.

Under the changes, policy decisions would remain with the City Council, while technical reviews would shift to Planning Board staff, a move Garcia said would reduce delays and improve consistency.

The changes also include consolidating unused zoning districts to reduce confusion and better align zoning with neighborhoods.

“This is just the beginning of a transparent, public process,” Garcia said. “There will be multiple opportunities for residents to participate, ask questions, and help shape the final outcome.”

City Councilors Mimi Panitch and Anne Thalheimer recently hosted a podcast to discuss the proposed zoning changes.

During an interview, Thalheimer said the conversation focused on proposed changes that affect three categories of agricultural and residential districts. Thalheimer said two of the city’s rural districts allow the same uses and have similar property values.

“It makes sense to consolidate them,” she said.

Thalheimer said the timing for the changes also makes sense, because the city has been working on a comprehensive plan for years.

Addressing concerns about the mailed zoning notice, Thalheimer said the city included what was required by law, even though the letter did not have many details. She said the goal is to encourage residents to come to the hearing to learn more and take part in the discussion.

Thalheimer also said the proposal does not include changes to industrial zoning. She said any future effort to change industrial zoning would require a separate public hearing and approval by the full City Council.

Panitch said state law requires both the Planning Board and the City Council to hold public hearings before any zoning ordinance can be changed.

In Holyoke, she said, the City Council's hearing is handled by its ordinance committee.

Panitch said that while some zoning proposals can be addressed in a single meeting, more complex changes often require multiple sessions. In those cases, she said, the public hearing is continued so residents have additional time to learn about the proposal and share their input.

This is common, standard practice, she added.

"The information we're trying to get from it matters and will affect the proposal itself, and we really and truly want Holyokers to understand what's in this package and to be comfortable with it," she said.

She said the ordinance committee is scheduled to open its public hearing Tuesday night in council chambers, while the Planning Board will hold its hearing remotely via Zoom.

Panitch said although the hearings overlap, recordings will be available. She said the hearings are expected to continue to future dates, echoing Garcia that Tuesday will not be the only chance for public input.

"The hearing in (committee) will have to stay open no matter what, to await a recommendation from the Planning Board, so even in the wildly unlikely event that Holyoke decides between now and then that there are no remaining issues to be discussed, this won't be anyone's last-ever bite at the apple," Panitch said.