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By Laura Millsaps

Fareway Finally Gets Green Light

It went quietly at the end.

After months of wrangling over land use policy and zoning, the Ames City Council passed the adoption of a zoning ordinance that would allow the construction of a Fareway grocery store at Bloomington and Stange roads.

Developer Chuck Winkleblack said after the meeting he expected to transfer the deed for the property to Fareway Stores by mid-July.

Fareway Stores CEO Rick Beckwith said in a phone interview this morning the company was "excited" by the news of the council's approval and had plans to move quickly.

"We want to be in the ground as soon as we possibly can," Beckwith said, adding Fareway did not have a completion date at this time.

The development proposal pushed the council into a months-long debate concerning the proximity of commercial development next to the village concept of the Somerset area and the desire to provide north Ames residents the possibility of more business services.

In order to achieve the zoning for the development to proceed, a land use policy amendment and map amendment was necessary. A first version of a land use amendment that would have allowed the zoning change was defeated 3-3 on Sept 11, 2007.

A more narrowly defined amendment followed, which allowed exceptions to the placement of commercial zones next to village concept areas. Currently, the only village concept area in the city of Ames is Somerset Village and the only situation to which the land use amendment applies.

The land use amendment proved controversial. The issue filled council chambers Dec. 18, with the public speaking both in support of the grocery store and against spot zoning and random development. The amendment passed 5-1 after two failed votes that same evening. In the end, the council limited the development to a specific list of businesses: a grocery store, a car wash, a convenience store and a medical clinic.

In other business Tuesday night, the council decided a deteriorating mobile home park at 3503 Lincoln Way that is zoned highway-oriented commercial meets the criteria of "underutilized" for the purposes of the city's urban revitalization program.

The city's urban revitalization program encourages rehabilitation of underused or blighted commercial areas through partial property tax abatement. The program requires the property be determined to be blighted or underutilize to qualify for abatement.

Winkleblack, who is negotiating the purchase of the land, plans to redevelop the property for commercial use. A vacant portion of the property is zoned low-density residential and would be developed into single family homes.

Winkleblack had requested the council clarify the qualification criteria for urban revitalization. He was concerned if the property was cleared of mobile homes and cleaned up, the property would no longer be considered slum or blighted property.

The council voted 4-2 in favor of defining the property as "underutilized," with Jim Popken and Matthew Goodman voting no. Council's approval of the property as an urban revitalization area is a separate action was not voted on.