Clemson council rejects Keowee Trail changes

Residents express concerns about pace of construction

BY GREG OLIVER
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CLEMSON — Clemson City Council unanimously voted against the first of two options Monday night regarding the amendment of the height standard for commercial usage along Keowee Trail and declined to take action on the other.

Two readings were required, with second and final reading scheduled at the next city council meeting Jan. 19 — a day later than usual due to the city's observance of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday.

The first option offered to council by city staff would have allowed the change in height to all uses by amending a section involving density, bulk and dimensional requirements for principal and accessory uses and/or structures in the nonresidential districts to change the height on Keowee Trail to 65 feet.

The second option was to limit the height increase to hotels or motels only in a similar manner to another section that allows, as a conditional use, hotels or motels to have 65 feet in height in the CP-2 district.

While no action was taken on Option 2, council member Jerry Chapman made the motion to not approve the first option. Chapman said he wants to see Keowee Trail, which includes Abernathy Park, developed into a special destination for visitors.

"This whole tract of land, bordered by College Avenue, Tiger Boulevard and Keowee Trail, is, I feel, the most critical property in downtown Clemson because it gives the last opportunity to have a destination location that will appeal to much more than the student population," Chapman said.

During Monday night's meeting, several local residents expressed concerns about the latest of many projects either already taking place or that will soon be taking place in downtown Clemson.

"Personally, the concern is the pace of construction we're allowing, the scale of construction we're allowing and quality of construction we're allowing," said Derek Hodgin, of Shorecrest Drive. "It seems reckless to continue approving the number of projects we're approving in such short order."

Katie Gilley, of Folger Street, said there is uncertainty as to the quality of the project being proposed for Keowee Trail.

"Because someone comes and says they want to build something, do we build and change our whole town for them?" Gilley said. "There could be 65-foot-tall buildings going all the way to College Avenue. We need to know what it looks like and how it's going to attract people here."

Keith Collins, who is seeking to develop Keowee Trail, said he talked to Planning and Codes director Sharon Richardson to learn which areas of the city "need to be developed," and Keowee Trail was suggested.

"It was part of the Comprehensive Plan that citizens participated in, and I'm sure it will be developed whether it is 50 feet or 65 feet," Collins said.

Ken Brown, of Wellington Way, said he favors student housing for that area.

"Clemson University is right around 24,000 (enrollment), and I'm told they want to increase to over 30,000, so I think increasing the density of the student population closer to campus — while it may seem like it's approaching downtown — will protect and preserve the city of Clemson as a whole," Brown said. "You have more room for single-family development, which is needed, outside the downtown area."

But Chapman said he doesn't feel Keowee Trail should be devoted to students since Edgewood Avenue and Strode Circle are areas that already accommodate that population.

Mayor J.C. Cook, while saying he understands Chapman's reason for his motion, added "there's no guarantee a 50-foot development is going to be any better."

Council member Jim Oswald said he understands the public consternation regarding the Keowee Trail project — particularly as it relates to the potential for additional student apartments and increased traffic.

"We're people tasked with listening to other people, developers and owners, and determining if a project presented to us fits within the purview of the other stakeholders and that the citizens best interests are served," Oswald said. "We have a minimum standard of 50 feet. If they can develop something within that standard, good — if not, bring in the plan and show it to us.

"We want to make sure the citizens are honored, the landowners are honored and if someone wants to bring something to us, bring us a good plan."

Chapman said he attended meetings when the Comprehensive Plan 2024 was being formulated, and some of the discussions brought out about that time about building height have been misinterpreted.

"To say in the Comprehensive Plan that the citizens wanted a 65-foot tall building is a stretch," Chapman said.

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