

Giant, unused parking lots will no longer be required in the city of Willmar

The Willmar City Council on June 20 approved removing parking minimums from the city of Willmar's zoning ordinance.



By Jennifer Kotila

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The Willmar City Council last week approved removing parking minimums from its zoning ordinance, removing a "major barrier to investment" for business owners and developers.

As it had been written, Willmar's parking minimum ordinance based the required parking spaces on the square footage of a building rather than on the building's use.

"The vast majority of the variance requests that we've had recently have been around parking," said Willmar Planning and Development Director Justice Walker during the June 20 meeting. "Generally speaking, if you have that many variance requests around a single ordinance, you should change the ordinance."

"Obviously the ordinance isn't working. Obviously, there is support from regulatory boards like the (Board of Zoning Appeals) and the Planning Commission to exempt people from the ordinance and that is more of a trend and pattern, not just these one-time things," he continued.

He explained that the question of how much parking is required is something that frequently stalls development within the city, with developers pushing back on the parking required by city ordinance as well as whether or not the parking lot has to be paved.

"We go round and round about this all the time, and it is always a major question — and a major barrier to investment in the community — is how onerous our parking standards are," Walker said.

He pointed out a number of other communities of similar size to Willmar that have repealed their parking minimums and noted that the city's Central Business District, which encompasses downtown Willmar, does not require parking.

"This is not just a big city thing where people have these built-out transit facilities. This is something that small towns across the nation have been doing," Walker said. "Generally speaking, this has been more of a trend, because this is something that communities are running into across the nation, is that parking is more of an obstacle for people instead of a way to ensure sound development."

The parking that will be required by a particular business will now be determined by Willmar city staff and the developer of the property, who will have to provide evidence during plan review as to why the number of parking spaces to be constructed will suit the developed property.

Walker gave several recent examples of businesses that were granted variances or built fewer parking spaces than the city's ordinance required.

Farm-Rite, an agricultural equipment dealership, is currently in the process of constructing a new building; the square footage of the building requires Farm-Rite to build 40 parking spaces. The site plan for the new building now shows 24 parking spaces, but "they don't want to build 24, they would love to build eight," Walker said.

Slim Chickens is required to have around 50 parking spaces for its planned restaurant in the former Pizza Hut location, and its site plan shows 29 spaces. In order to be approved, a joint parking agreement had to be drafted between Slim Chickens and Uptown Willmar.

"Hobby Lobby has a massive parking lot, one of the biggest parking lots in town," Walker said. "It's hardly ever full. Hobby Lobby still underbuilt required parking by over 100 spaces. We don't know how it got approved: There's no variance for it, no nothing."

Noting that parking spaces are estimated to cost \$5,000 to \$8,000 each to construct, Hobby Lobby saved more than a million dollars by not building the additional 100 spaces, Walker said.

"Another thing about parking lots: They create this massive wasteland of concrete and it's just not the best thing to look at," Walker said, noting that another amendment to the zoning ordinance includes a requirement of one tree for every four parking spaces in a parking lot. "Trees, a lot better to look at."

"I think it's a great idea, because we have a lot of really big parking lots in our city and we saw over the winter, they got really bad," said Councilor Vicki Davis. "Walmart had to put a lot of money into fixing their parking lot and I think their lot is way too big. I think this will help a lot of businesses."