



DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

Planning Division

m e m o r a n d u m

TO: The Urbana Historic Preservation Commission
FROM: Kat Trotter, Planner I
DATE: January 28, 2022
SUBJECT: Study Session – Exploring Zoning Changes to Help Preserve Buildings in the R-7 District

Introduction

The intent of the R-7, University Residential zoning district is to provide areas for dormitories and rooming houses near the University of Illinois, and to insure the longevity, architectural character, and use of the existing buildings in the district. While the zoning regulations in the R-7 district have done a good job of preventing the buildings in the district from being torn down, those same regulations make reuse and, in turn, preservation of these important buildings more difficult.

Housing demand from students has been changing for some time, and it has become more difficult for property owners to rent out many of the existing group houses in the R-7 district. There is also less demand for fraternity and sorority houses than there once was.

In 2019, Landmarks Illinois included Greek Housing at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign on its list of the “Most Endangered” historic places in Illinois.¹ While the R-7 regulations have likely insulated Urbana from having historic Greek houses torn down and replaced with new structures, they do not provide a path to preserve these important historic buildings.

The R-7 zoning district contains all of Urbana’s historic and architecturally significant fraternity and sorority houses, so the City’s Planning Division is exploring options to adjust our zoning regulations to help preserve these buildings and ensure their viability for decades to come. To that end, the Planning staff seeks input from the Historic Preservation Commission on the proposed changes to the R-7 zoning district. Typically, when Planning staff asks for comments from the HPC on pending zoning cases,² Commission members submit their comments in writing directly to staff. In this case, since the scope is much larger than a typical zoning case, and any changes to the R-7 district would affect every historic Greek house in Urbana, staff felt that a larger discussion at an HPC meeting was warranted.

Background

The R-7, Dormitory Residential zoning district was created in October 1983³. The district was intended to “provide areas for dormitories in close proximity to the University of Illinois, to insure the longevity of their architectural character and use and protect adjacent residential districts from incompatible development.” The district originally only allowed dormitories (which includes fraternities and sororities) and rooming houses.

¹ <https://www.landmarks.org/preservation-programs/most-endangered-historic-places-in-illinois/>

² While the Zoning Ordinance grants the HPC the power to “... review and comment upon submitted applications for zoning amendments... for properties contiguous to ... landmarks and historic districts,” HPC members typically submit written comments to staff. In this case,

³ Plan Case No. 1143-T-82, Ordinance No. 8384-25.

On June 4, 1990, the City Council adopted the Downtown to Campus Plan⁴, which recommended changes to the R-7, Dormitory Residential zoning district. In Plan Case No. 1366-T-90, the “R-7, Dormitory Residential” district was changed to the “R-7, University Residential” district and the following were added to the Table of Uses:

Church or Temple	Special Use
Boarding House	Permitted Use
Dwelling, Multifamily	Special Use
Dwelling, community living facility, Category I	Permitted Use
Dwelling, community living facility, Category II	Permitted Use
Dwelling, community living facility, Category III	Permitted Use
Dwelling, home for adjustment	Special Use
Multiple-Family Residential	Special Use

Multi-family residential uses (apartments) were allowed with a special use permit in the R-7 district until 2002, when Table V-1. Table of Uses was amended to no longer allow them.⁵ All other permitted uses remain the same.

There are 43 properties zoned R-7, University Residential in Urbana. They are concentrated on the east and west sides of Lincoln Avenue, between Illinois Street to the north and Florida Avenue to the south⁶. Most of the properties have been or are being used as group homes, fraternities or sororities, and are located close to the University of Illinois campus. However, the demand for these types of housing is decreasing.

Timeline

In November 2020, planning staff surveyed property owners in the R-7 district to get a better understanding of the challenges of the current zoning regulations. In July 2021, staff brought the general idea of adding apartments and limited commercial uses to R-7 buildings to Plan Commission as a study session. The Plan Commission expressed some concerns about the financial feasibility of converting certain existing buildings for other uses, and whether renovated buildings could meet building code. They also suggested that staff consider buildings and properties individually or in groups, based on the property or building’s use (e.g. treating Greek houses and rooming houses separately). Overall, the Plan Commission was in support of the proposed text amendment.

Since then, staff has hosted two virtual neighborhood meetings on this topic. The neighborhood significant concerns about parcel aggregation and out-of-scale development on these properties, if the existing buildings were to be demolished and the sites were to be redeveloped. There was a consensus that the buildings and properties in the R-7 district should be treated differently, based on current and historical uses. Following the neighborhood meetings, staff has been conducting further research and analysis, and has been working on draft language for the R-7 zoning update.

Proposed Changes Being Considered

Planning staff are exploring potential changes to the R-7 district to ensure the long-term viability of existing buildings in the district, while also providing more options to reuse the old fraternity, sorority, and rooming houses that make up the district.

⁴ Downtown to Campus Plan, Ordinance 8990-132.

⁵ Plan Case No. 1816-T-02, Ordinance No. 2002-04-041.

⁶ See *Location Map* in Exhibits.

General Approach

Staff is considering whether it would be more appropriate to make uniform changes district-wide, or whether to make changes to different properties in the district based on shared characteristics (e.g. their current and historical uses). A uniform approach would be simpler, since only one set of changes would need to be made, but it would be less-nuanced than applying rules based on a subset of similar properties.

Rooming and boarding houses are generally much different than fraternities and sororities not only in use, but in form. The former tend to look like – and often were – old homes, while the latter tend to be much more massive, architecturally-detailed, and *grand*. Many, if not all, of the sorority and fraternity houses could easily be designated as local and/or national historic landmarks. The same cannot be said for most of the boarding and rooming houses in the district; they are, however, an important part of the fabric of the neighborhood, and any proposed changes should reflect that. There are also a small number of religious buildings in the R-7 district, which could warrant further differentiation when applying changes to the district.

Because there are two or three distinct subsets of R-7 properties based on their use and form, staff believes that an approach that allows different changes for different types of properties would be the most useful.

Allow More Uses in Existing Buildings

To promote re-use of buildings in the R-7 district, staff suggests that for **existing buildings**, the allowed uses be expanded to match what is permitted in the Mixed-Office Residential (MOR) zoning district. The MOR district allows for limited commercial, public, and residential uses. Allowing such new uses for existing buildings in the R-7 district would provide flexibility to preserve and reuse existing buildings, while continuing to limit the allowed uses for new buildings would preserve a strong disincentive to demolishing buildings in the district. As proposed, apartments and commercial uses would not be permitted in new buildings in the R-7 district, as allowing those uses could encourage teardowns of existing buildings. The objective of the text amendment is to promote reuse and preservation of existing buildings, and prevent teardowns. Allowing new uses in existing buildings could allow some unique and creative adaptations of Greek houses in the future, and could allow rooming and boarding houses to be repurposed as well.

Relax Parking Requirements for Reuse of Existing Buildings

Parking requirements can be a huge obstacle to reusing existing buildings.⁷ Most of the R-7 properties do not have room to add parking on-site, so the text amendment should address parking to help preserve buildings in the district. To that end, staff proposes that parking requirements be relaxed when a building is being reused, especially if the new use is similar to the former use (e.g. converting a fraternity or sorority into apartments). This would create flexibility and make it easier for existing buildings to house new uses, without the burden of adding parking. For new buildings or additions, additional parking would still be required at the rates provided in Table VIII-7 of the Zoning Ordinance. This would further incentivize the reuse of buildings, since replacing them with a new building would likely require more on-site parking.

Questions for HPC

1. Does the HPC feel that zoning changes should apply uniformly to all R-7 properties, or should different regulations apply to different properties (e.g. one set of changes for Greek houses, another set for rooming houses)?

⁷ This is a major reason that Urbana eliminated all parking requirements in the B-4, Central Business District. It would be nearly impossible to open a new restaurant, for example, in a downtown building if it had to meet parking requirements that apply elsewhere in Urbana.

2. Would the HPC support allowing multi-family residential and/or limited commercial uses in existing buildings in the R-7, University Residential zoning district? More specifically, would the uses allowed in the MOR, Mixed Office Residential zoning district be appropriate in the R-7 district?
3. Would the HPC be in favor of reducing parking requirements, in some fashion, to promote reuse of existing buildings in the R-7 district?

Staff asks that the Historic Preservation Commission consider the questions above and provide comments to staff. If the Commission chooses to, they may forward a resolution of support for the proposed text amendment (Plan Case 2438-T-21) to the Plan Commission. Staff also welcomes any additional comments from Commission members in writing.

Attachments: Exhibit A: [Location Map](#)
 Exhibit B: [Building Type Map](#)
 Exhibit C: [Photo Inventory](#)
 Exhibit D: [R-7 Zoning Description Sheet](#)
 Exhibit E: [MOR Zoning Description Sheet](#)