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SmartCode plan hammered out

Mayor aims to sell zoning concept

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GULFPORT - Mayor Brent Warr, the administration and urban planner Jeff Bounds have finished putting together a SmartCode for the city after months of meetings, calculations, calibration and plain, old elbow grease.

Now comes the hard part. They have to convince the rest of their often-skeptical city their version of the SmartCode - which is basically a new way of thinking about zoning a city - is good for them.

"Fortunately, it's still on the word processor," said Warr, adding he expects parts of what they worked on for months to change before it has a chance to become law.

The administration is not wasting any time, having gotten the polished version of the Code last week. Council members, developers and residents will be getting a crash-course tutorial, in several sessions starting Monday, on the ins and outs of what could be described as a complicated system of mixed-use zoning with design standards.

Though there is an item on the agenda for Tuesday's council meeting that refers to SmartCode, it is more an adoption of a general master plan that was agreed on during February's charrette, said David Nichols, chief administrative officer. By adopting that plan, Nichols said Gulfport is increasing the points it gets while applying for Community Block Development Grant funding, which is being decided on at the Capitol in Jackson right now.

Jeff Bounds, a Gulfport native and an engineer with multiple degrees from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who is leading the SmartCode effort for the city, said he believes there are three reasons their efforts in selling this idea to the rest of the city will be successful.

First, Bounds said most of the ideas in the SmartCode came from the February charrettes, which means they already contain a lot of input from residents throughout the city.

"Secondly, there's the fact that the zoning that we've all had up to now has been pretty abysmal," Bounds said. "There's some neighborhoods that are fine, but in most places people see aspects of living that are disappearing because our zoning documents are making it impossible to live in ways that are really Southern."

Finally, some of the best minds in America have contributed to producing Gulfport's SmartCode, Bounds said.

Warr said if all goes smoothly, he hopes the actual SmartCode will be adopted by the council before the end of the year.

"Of course, it's going to be up to the council," Warr said. "Probably what we'll do is pick and choose the 'no-brainers' on the front end."

SmartCode will not be replacing current zoning laws, Warr said. Instead, by the administration's design, builders and developers will be able to choose between which set of standards to abide by.

"It's an optional product and that's key," Warr said. "You've got the standard zoning map and SmartCode (side by side.) It's very unlikely we'll make it mandatory."

Warr said he hopes more people will use SmartCode, because it allows for more kinds of mixed-use development than traditional zoning does. He said building within SmartCode rules is "faster, more profitable and better looking."

Warr said he hopes the council adopts SmartCode in a wider area than the only other Coast town to adopt thus far did. Moss Point adopted a version of SmartCode for its downtown area only.

"I think there are going to be some places where it doesn't make sense," said Warr, adding he still hopes a majority of the city takes it on.

City spokeswoman Kelly Jakubik said the whole administration is behind the drive to adopt SmartCode and are optimistic about the outcome of the forthcoming effort.

"It's going to be a tough sell," Jakubik said. "We want everyone to keep an open mind. It's smart growth for Gulfport."

SmartCode presentation

What: *Presentation of SmartCode recommendations to City Council.*

When: *3:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. Monday.*

Where: *City Hall council chambers.*

Second meeting

What: *Presentation to Realtors, contractors and developers.*

When: *4:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. Thursday.*

Where: *MGCCC-Jefferson Davis campus cafeteria.*

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