STUDY SESSION

The study session commenced at 6:25 p.m.

1. Single-family building scale related to affordable housing

Mr. Morrison presented the report. He noted the council is looking for planning commission feedback. He stated council is concerned about scale of housing, affordability, impact on neighbors, neighborhood character, supporting move-up in the park, however they do not want to regulate style of design, such as architectural style, windows style/quality, etc. of single-family houses.

Chair Kraft asked where the two examples fall related to the ground floor ratio. Mr. Morrison presented one specific block that staff identified that included buildings adjacent to one another with low, middle and high ground floor ratio. He stated on this block that most lots are the same size, but floor area ratios of the buildings are very different. He noted there is much variation on floor ratios within the city and showed various examples of this.

Commissioner Beneke asked about ground floor elevation and what the current standard is now. Mr. Morrison explained and stated some cities set rules on this but St. Louis Park does not have a standard currently.

Commissioner Eckholm asked if the roof height issue might be looked at with compromises in mind and that adjusts based on the first-floor elevation and floor to ceiling heights. Mr. Morrison stated houses do have a maximum height allowed in St. Louis Park and depending on how a main floor might be raised, the grade might not be changed, or it may, thereby affecting the overall height. He added there are various ways this can be worded.
Commissioner Beneke asked about adding an egress window and what options are available for that. He asked if that might be a motivation for raising the grade or first floor elevation. Mr. Morrison stated that most do not raise a house height to add an egress window, they usually excavate to provide a window well.

Commissioner Weber asked if staff discussed whether raising first floor elevations or impacts of that change relates to climate change and more rain or flash floods. Mr. Morrison stated staff is sensitive to impacts upon the water table and drainage patterns.

Mr. Walther added staff has done a lot of modeling on this as well as part of the comprehensive plan and surface water management to reflect the latest rainfall data.

Chair Kraft asked if there is any thought of changing setbacks. She asked if there was a limit on the number of permits that can be issued and added that kind of approach seems not to encourage the Move Up in the Park program. She wondered how this might encourage limitations.

Mr. Walther stated staff could look at this.

Commissioner Beneke asked if ADU’s in the basement might be looking to increase ceiling heights and recognized this might affect the affordability of the home and ADU. Mr. Morrison confirmed that ADUs could be located in the basement and increasing the ceiling height would add cost but would also make them more desirable.

Commissioner Eckholm asked about ADU’s or duplexes and if folks want to build huge homes, people should also be able to build larger buildings to be used for duplexes or ADUs. He added this is one strategy to include climate considerations and affordable housing.

Mr. Walther stated that the comprehensive plan housing strategies does say the city will explore allowing duplexes in low density residential areas on appropriate-sized properties. He anticipates this will be in the commission’s 2021 work plan.

Commissioner Weber agreed with Commission Eckholm’s statements.

Mr. Morrison addressed Chair Kraft’s comments on heights and setbacks. He stated of the city’s current side setbacks, many existing homes already don’t meet the requirements for various reasons. A change to the setbacks would not have much impact to change the current house locations, as existing houses can remain in their current location and would become non-conforming. It is only when a house is completely torn down and a new house is built that it is required to meet side setbacks. He also explained the city’s current rules regarding the side yard setbacks for longer walls. He explained that the side walls of a house up to 40 feet in length can be placed at the minimum setback. If a house is longer, the side yard increases two inches for every foot the side of the house exceeds 40 feet in length. The code already includes some dynamic yard requirements to avoid long, flat side wall elevations.
Mr. Walther added the city has about 10-15 teardowns per year vs Edina which has 150+ each year. He added this is a relatively small number compared to other cities and compared to the approximately 15,000 single family houses in the city.

Mr. Walther referred to the staff report and added that Edina had an upper story side yard setback requirement but eventually they eliminated it as it was difficult to administer and it added significant costs to projects because it required changing the location of load-bearing walls or installing beams to support the upper wall.

Commissioner Weber noted the tear downs in Edina and asked if St. Louis Park has any policy to discourage tear downs. Mr. Walther stated the city has no stated policy that discourages tear downs. Some practices are in place that may indicate that because we require notifications to neighbors and neighborhood meetings before the city issues a building permit. Also, our incentive programs do not fund tear downs.

Mr. Walther stated we want to encourage residents to build and stay here in St. Louis Park and provide housing for families. Staff’s understanding of this discussion is not to get into the detailed style and look of houses but rather focus on mass and scale and how that might affect housing affordability, as well. Many of the city housing programs are tailored to help low and medium-income homeowners. He asked if the commission has further recommendations for staff to explore in more depth that might better touch on these aspects.

Commissioner Eckholm asked about maximum ground floor elevation is one to look further into as well as the side yard setback adjustments. He added he is not offended by larger homes and encouraged promoting expansions vs. teardowns.

Commissioner Beneke asked if there is a case where a larger built home might shade a home next door. Mr. Morrison stated the homes in St. Louis Park are less than 10 feet apart so shading neighboring homes is common. He added this is partially the intent with the larger setbacks for long side walls. Mr. Walther added that it would be impossible to prohibit shadowing of neighboring houses with them being built in such close proximity and especially on north-south streets and blocks.

2. Home occupations

Mr. Morrison presented the report. He noted this is a priority discussion topic in the 2020 work plan for the commission and for the city council.

He noted several previously raised topics for discussion lifting the prohibition on barbers/hairdressers as a home occupation allowing one or more outside employees, allowing home occupations in accessory buildings, allowing them occupy more than 10% of the principal building, and allowing residents of ADUs to conduct home occupations in the ADU they occupy.

Mr. Morrison stated discussion about the uses and character of the residential neighborhood should also be discussed to provide context for other decisions.
Commissioner Weber asked if the registration of land use requirement applies to people working from home now during the pandemic, such as home offices. Mr. Walther stated the registration of land use is required only when there are customers or students that come to the home. It does not apply to a home office if people living there are using the office.

Commissioner Eckholm asked about machinery and/or equipment uses within the home. He stated this may need to be re-worded to be more permissive.

Commissioner Weber noted the animal handling occupation and asked if this would be allowed as long as they stay within the city’s allowable three animal/pet limit. Mr. Morrison stated this can be discussed further.

Commissioner Weber stated there would seem to be many examples of people who would be surprised they are breaking city rules with their home occupation. He stated he thinks about this being a first interaction with the city and the impression that would leave for them.

Mr. Morrison stated staff typically will not contact the person unless a city staff person witnesses the violation. Mr. Walther added, in practice, staff is not out doing house calls and aggressively searching for these types of violations but noted the city does regularly receive complaints from neighbors about home occupations that run afoul of the rules. A common one is car repair service; there are multiple cars being repaired or stored outside on a property in various states of repair.

Commissioner Weber asked if the city has specified the language in the ADU ordinance that says the actual ADU is actually used primarily or only for the home occupation. Mr. Walther stated this was one of the reasons raised by city council for having this discussion. He stated right now it is a bit grey in this area as to how to interpret the code, so more clarity will need to come of this.

Commissioner Beneke stated he is unclear as to what he would want to do with the ADU/home occupation, and this warrants more discussion.

Chair Kraft stated she is in alignment with most of what has been discussed. She would have concerns with noises or odors but has no concerns about barber/beauty salons, daycares, or a 3D printer in a house.

Commissioner Weber would also support some research into barber/beauty salons, as it serves a path of entry into business ownership, especially for communities that may not have access to commercial space. Commissioner Beneke added he agrees with this idea in general.

Commissioner Dagane agreed with the comments made in the discussion as well and would have concerns also with what kind of business it was and traffic issues.
Mr. Walther stated this topic will be researched further and brought to the council for input before the discussions are concluded with the commission. This will allow the commission to discuss after council and incorporate council comments in their deliberation.

3. Miscellaneous zoning amendments

This topic will be brought back at the next study session since there was not time to consider it at this meeting.

4. Communications

Commissioner Lynette Dumalag resigned from the commission and has been appointed to the city council to represent and 2nd ward after Anne Mavity’s resignation from the city council.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:05 p.m.