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Council approves comprehensive rezoning process changes

By Lindsey McPherson, lmcpherson@patuxent.com

10:36 PM EDT, July 2, 2012

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The Howard County Council Monday unanimously passed a bill to streamline procedures and improve public notice provisions for the county's comprehensive rezoning process — a move aimed at preventing the process from dragging on for years and leading to referendum petitions and lawsuits, as happened in the most recent process.

Conducted every eight to 10 years, comprehensive rezoning is a sweeping look at the zoning of county properties and typically the only time in which the county will entertain rezoning requests from property owners.

The referendum petition and lawsuit that stemmed from "Comp Lite," an extension of the 2003-2004 comprehensive rezoning process, were unsuccessful. But neither council members nor members of County Executive Ken Ulman's administration, which introduced the bill, want to take the chance that history will repeat itself.

The bill changes the process by adding a formal notification period, in which information is advertised in local newspapers, posted on the county's website and emailed to individuals and organizations registered with the Department of Planning and Zoning, before the initial comprehensive rezoning petition is prepared.

As a part of the initial notification process, DPZ will set a deadline of a minimum of 60 days by which property owners seeking a zoning change must submit a formal application.

In crafting the bill, the administration had specified that no new requests should be accepted after the initial deadline. The change was largely aimed at preventing a flood of last-minute rezoning requests, as occurred in the last comprehensive rezoning process and spurred the need for Comp Lite.

However, council members felt that provision was a limitation on their power and amended the bill to allow new requests approved by four or more members of the council.

"We felt that (initial proposal) was inappropriate or an overreach," council member Courtney Watson said, noting that the council must have the ability to entertain last-minute requests that solve problems that may come up throughout the process.

The council also included some additional deadlines that were not a part of the original bill. One requires DPZ to prepare and submit the initial comprehensive rezoning petition to the Planning Board within 45 days of the deadline it sets for receiving petitions. Another requires the Planning Board to review and submit the petition and its recommendations to the council within 60 days of holding its first public hearing on the petition crafted by DPZ.

In addition, the council amended the bill to restore the time of notice required before public hearings to 30 days. The administration had proposed reducing the notice to 15 days, but council members did not feel that was enough time.

At the same meeting, the council tabled legislation that would implement PlanHoward 2030, the latest once-a-decade update to the county's General Plan.

The council also voted to table several resolutions that would amend various sections of the county charter, including an amendment that would raise the number of four-year terms council members can serve from three to four and an amendment that would tweak the signature requirement for referendum.

The council is expected to vote on both issues July 26.