

Minneapolis park commissioner's bid to preserve W. Calhoun neighborhood reignites density debate

Supporters say the designation will protect neighborhood character.

By Miguel Otárola (<http://www.startribune.com/miguel-otarola/396828811/>) Star Tribune |

AUGUST 13, 2019 — 9:56PM

An attempt by a Minneapolis Park Board commissioner to designate her neighborhood as a “conservation district” has caught the attention of housing advocates who see it as a way to block denser development.

Park Board Commissioner Meg Forney’s application to the city has reignited the debate between pro- and anti-density groups that began around the 2040 Comprehensive Plan. Adopted last year by the City Council, the guiding document calls for eliminating single-family zoning citywide in favor of increased density to address a critical housing shortage.

Conservation districts are areas “distinguished by quality of design or detail, innovation, rarity, or uniqueness,” according to the city’s charter. Under the designation, property owners can set design guidelines that keep intact notable features of the district.

Though the City Council approved the designation in 2014, there are no conservation districts in Minneapolis. This is the first application received by the city, according to Andrea Burke, the city’s supervisor for historic preservation.

Forney’s district would encompass her home and 25 others, located off West Calhoun Parkway on the west side of Bde Maka Ska/Lake Calhoun. The secluded neighborhood is bordered by the Minikahda Club golf course on the south and larger apartment buildings on the north.

Forney, who has lived in her home since the 1980s, said Tuesday that she learned about conservation districts more than a year ago. Her neighbors agreed to pursue the designation last summer, and the application was submitted under her name in July.

“There are pockets throughout the city that have a distinctive history to them that is unique and tell, shall we say, a tale ... of the city’s evolution or development,” Forney said. “And ours seems as if it does.”

She described the homes in her neighborhood as “diminutive in size and scale” and having a “cottage aesthetic.”

“We’re utilizing the tools that are available to every member of the city,” she said of the designation. “It was put there for a reason.”

Neighbors for More Neighbors, a group that has pushed for greater density in Minneapolis, sent an e-mail blast Monday opposing Forney’s plan. A light-rail station will be built nearby as part of the Southwest LRT expansion, the letter argued, and the 2040 plan determined the zoning code would change to include higher density housing in the neighborhood, which is currently zoned for duplexes or smaller homes.

“This push to create a conservation district is a transparent attempt by lakeside property owners to nullify and opt out of the 2040 plan,” the e-mail read. “Allowing a conservation district here would set a precedent that encourages others to seek special exemptions for their neighborhoods — thereby limiting access to jobs, transit, parks and schools.”



RICHARD TSONG TANTARU - STAR TRIBUNE



SPECIAL TO THE STAR TRIBUNE

Meg Forney

In response, Minneapolis for Everyone, a group that opposes the 2040 plan, sent its own e-mail urging people to support the designation “or we will see the architectural treasures of our city steadily destroyed forever.”

“There are several neighborhoods around the city seeking to shield their area from unfettered development by establishing conservation or historic districts,” the e-mail said. “This is an important preservation effort to retain the architecture that makes Minneapolis a unique, diverse and culturally rich city.”

Park Board President Brad Bourn sent his own letter to the Heritage Preservation Commission on Friday, saying the designation could have an impact on the land and parkways surrounding the lake. He expressed concern that Forney did not bring up the matter with the Park Board.

“It’s very unusual that an application that so clearly impacts park users by the chair of the park board’s planning committee would [not] have been reviewed by the Park Board prior to its submittal,” Bourn said Tuesday. “We’re now forced to play catch-up.”

It’s not clear how a conservation district designation would affect proposed zoning code changes, Burke said. While the city’s charter says that design guidelines can’t “prohibit uses allowed by the zoning code,” it also says that “guidelines regulating building bulk may be more restrictive than the zoning code.”

Forney said increasing density around the lake would not lead to more affordable housing, one of the goals of the 2040 plan.

“We have a great deal of areas that are still underdeveloped and communities that are actually disenfranchised because of that lack of density and vibrancy,” she said.

“Whereas, in the Chain of Lakes ... we’re already having difficulty with the density that is there.

“To knock out already vibrant, established communities to create more density, to me it’s counterintuitive,” she said.

The Historic Preservation Commission was set to vote on Forney’s application Tuesday but postponed the discussion to Sept. 17, Burke said.

Miguel Otárola is a reporter covering Minneapolis City Hall for the Star Tribune. He previously covered Minneapolis' western suburbs and breaking news. He also writes about immigration and music on occasion.

motarola@startribune.com 612-673-4753 motarola123