

Southwestjournal

Southwest Minneapolis' Community Newspaper

Conservation district to get further study

West Calhoun proposal has stoked debate over density

NATE GOTLIEB / NGOTLIEB@MNPUBS.COM

SEPTEMBER 19, 2019

UPDATED: SEPTEMBER 20, 2019 - 4:55 PM

A request to grant a small, century-old West Calhoun neighborhood a never-before-used type of historic protection has cleared its first hurdle, though a majority of members of the Heritage Preservation Commission (HPC) have indicated doubts about the proposal.

The HPC has initiated a process that could result in a 3-plus-acre West Calhoun neighborhood becoming a conservation district. Designation of the neighborhood, which is immediately west of Bde Maka Ska, would include the creation of “design guidelines” that would regulate future development. Those guidelines could include restrictions on building height in a neighborhood slated for developments of 2–10 stories under the Minneapolis 2040 Comprehensive Plan.

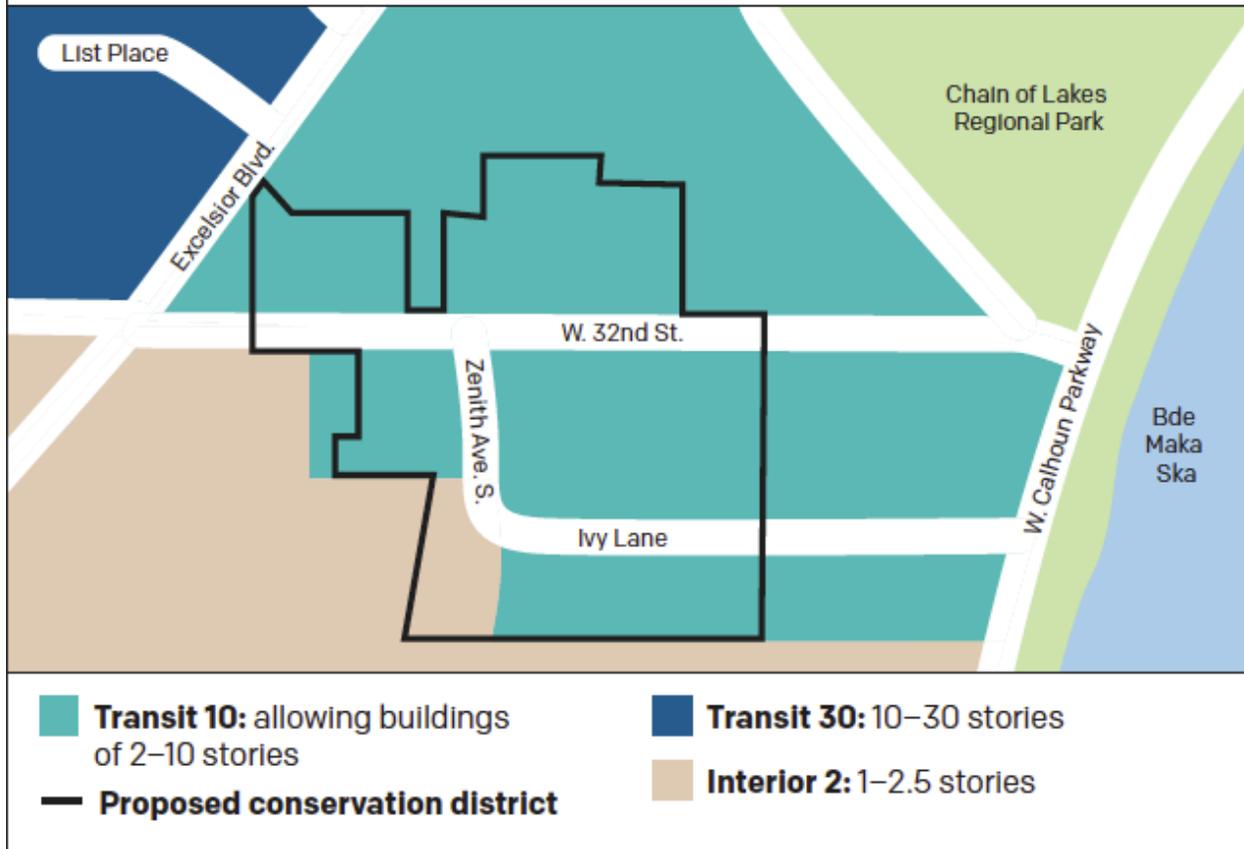
Preservation commissioners on Sept. 17 voted 5–3 to start a process studying whether the neighborhood merits the conservation district designation and creating guidelines for the district. But some commissioners who voted to start the process expressed skepticism over whether the neighborhood ultimately deserves the designation.

While some commissioners said they think the proposal is a good chance to test the 5-year-old conservation district ordinance, others said they worry conservation districts will be used as a tool to limit the housing density prescribed by the 2040 plan.

“I think it’s really important for us to not set a precedent that conservation districts can be used to prevent development in areas that could bring more equitable housing to our city,” commissioner Jesse Kling said.

PROPOSED WEST CALHOUN CONSERVATION DISTRICT

The Minneapolis 2040 Comprehensive Plan calls for a 3.2-acre area west of Bde Maka Ska to be zoned as a high-frequency transit district that would allow buildings up to 10 stories in height.



Conservation districts are supposed to be areas with noteworthy characteristics that aren't significant enough to merit a full historic designation. The process of creating a district can only be initiated by the property owners in an area.

After a period of study, city staff will work with neighbors to develop design guidelines. To become official, the guidelines will need to be approved by the State Historic Preservation Office, the Planning Commission, the HPC, the City Council and two-thirds of the district's property owners.

The 25-house West Calhoun neighborhood was the first to submit a complete conservation district application when it did so this summer. Park Board commissioner Meg Forney, who lives in the neighborhood, submitted the application.

Forney and her neighbors argued that their neighborhood is noteworthy because of its modest, street-oriented houses that encompass a variety of 20th-century architectural styles.

They said they're pursuing the designation in part because they're against the 10-story building heights that the 2040 plan will allow in the neighborhood.

Some pro-density advocates have spoken against the proposal, arguing that building height limits have already had sufficient public discussion.

They have also said passage would stifle development near a future light-rail station, which is problematic because increased transit usage will help the city meet its climate goals.

The Park Board has also opposed the designation, because it says higher-density development in the neighborhood could help eliminate historic disparities in park access.

Preservation commissioners said they support conservation districts as a tool, but they varied in their enthusiasm for the West Calhoun proposal.

Commissioner Ian Stade, who voted against the proposal, said he thinks the HPC needs to be careful when setting precedents for conservation districts. Commissioner Kimberly Sandbulte, who also voted against it, asked how the homes in the neighborhood are unique compared with others in nearby areas.

Commissioner Madelyn Sundberg, who supported initiating the process, said she feels like the proposal aligns with the goals of the new comprehensive plan, which calls in part for preserving small single-family homes. Commissioner Barbara Howard, who also voted in support, said she doesn't necessarily think the neighborhood merits designation but could see how others may think it does.

"Is there enough here ... to move forward with a conservation district? I would have to say there is," HPC chair Ginny Lackovic said. "Whether or not we follow through with that in the long run, that I don't know."

[BROWSE HERITAGE PRESERVATION COMMISSION, MINNEAPOLIS 2040, WEST CALHOUN](#)

southwestjournal