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NEWS

Proposed district challenges density

West Calhoun proposal could limit scale of development on 3.2 acres near Bde Maka Ska

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AUGUST 23, 2019

UPDATED: SEPTEMBER 19, 2019 - 12:19 PM



Cross street in the West Calhoun neighborhood

In a part of the West Calhoun neighborhood where the city envisions high-density residential development, more than two dozen homeowners have applied for a type of historic protection that could allow them to help dictate the size of future buildings.

The homeowners, who reside in an area immediately west of Bde Maka Ska that's currently zoned for one- or two-family development, have asked the city to designate their combined 3.2 acres as a "conservation district."

The designation, never before used in Minneapolis, would allow them to work with city planners to create "design guidelines" that could include limits on a building's height and square footage, senior city planner John Smoley said. Those limits could be more restrictive than the given zoning code, though they couldn't prevent uses allowed by the code.

The homeowners' application comes as the city prepares to update its zoning code after passage of the Minneapolis 2040 Comprehensive Plan, which calls for increasing the number of housing units in Minneapolis, especially near transit stations.

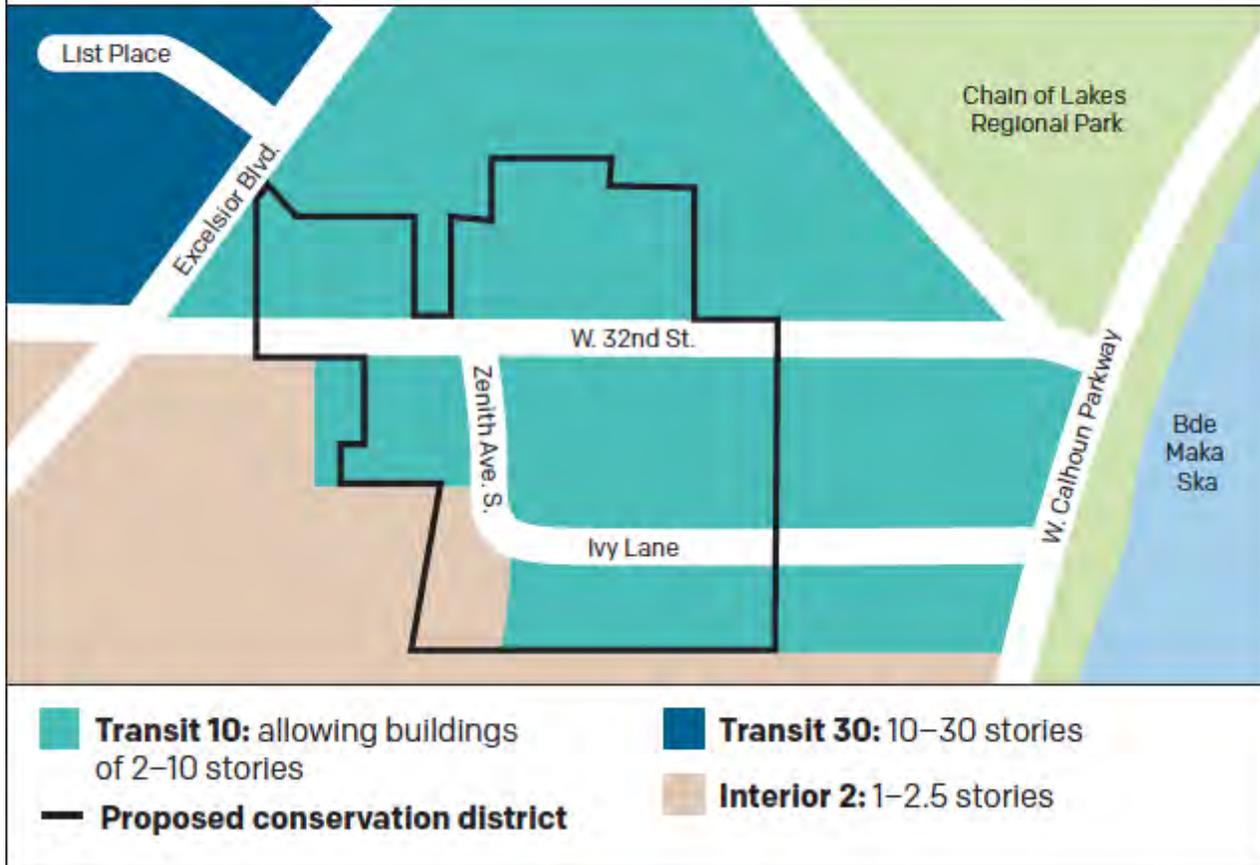
The proposed conservation district is blocks away from the future West Lake Street Southwest Light Rail Transit station, one of 16 along the 14.5-mile line that will run between Eden Prairie and Downtown Minneapolis starting in 2023. The 2040 Plan calls for the area containing the proposed district to be zoned as an urban neighborhood allowing buildings up to 10 stories in height.

West Calhoun resident Meg Forney, a Park Board commissioner who lives in the area and co-authored the proposal, said she's not sure she believes such density would be appropriate where there's "established community." She and neighbor Martha Yunker, an architect who helped draft the proposal, wrote that the area merits the designation because of its small lots and its architecturally varied houses.

"The intimate scale and distinctive character of houses and landscaping exist nowhere else in the city," they wrote.

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.



The group Neighbors for More Neighbors, which advocates for policies to increase Minneapolis' housing stock, has opposed the conservation district designation in part because it could restrict housing near a light rail station.

A message on the group's website posted by John Edwards, the activist behind Wedge LIVE, says that approving the designation would encourage others to seek exemptions to the 2040 Plan and could deny people the opportunity to live in an "amenity-rich" area.

The post said approval wouldn't move the city toward its climate change goals and that the proposed conservation district is a "glaring example" of how renters can be excluded from the process of setting housing policy. "Now is not the time to initiate a conservation district process that only requires the approval of [property] owners," it reads.

The conservation district would need to be approved by two-thirds of property owners, the Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office, the Planning Commission, the Heritage Preservation Commission and the City Council.

Minneapolis has had a conservation-district ordinance since 2014, when Prospect Park residents sought to preserve single-family homes in the neighborhood without being encumbered by the restrictions of a full historic designation.

The ordinance aimed to give property owners a “grassroots way” to set building standards that were more restrictive than what the zoning code offered, Smoley said. The city had never received a completed conservation district application before the West Calhoun residents submitted one earlier this summer.

Smoley estimated that between 150 and 175 people have written letters expressing opinions on the West Calhoun proposal, with the feedback evenly split between those in favor and opposed.

The city’s Heritage Preservation Commission (HPC) was scheduled to vote in August on whether to initiate the process of creating the West Calhoun conservation district. But that vote was delayed until September, Smoley said, to give staff time to process the large amount of feedback.

BROWSE [CONSERVATION DISTRICT, MINNEAPOLIS 2040, WEST CALHOUN](#)