

OUR VIEW New ULDC in North Port was needed

Sometimes you just have to bite the bullet, as the old saying goes. That's what the North Port City Commission did when it approved a new Unified Land Development Code that will go into effect Oct. 28. The code sets new criteria for what can be built in certain areas of the city — and the biggest takeaway is there will be a lot more land available for commercial development. That was the ultimate goal for a city that has way too many quarter-acre lots from the General Development era that are eating up space needed to bring new businesses to town.

The decision to make the changes was not an easy one. Commissioners fretted over how and where to make changes and prepared for scorn from citizens who did not agree with the tactic. The entire process actually has taken about seven years to bring to fruition. In the end, it came down to five commissioners doing their job and refusing to continue to kick the can down the road as past city commissions had done. The city is being strangled by residential lots and the end game is North Port becoming a bedroom community for people leaving the city and going to work in Sarasota and Charlotte County. That's not a formula that would grow a city or allow for the amenities that most residents want.

A study used to plan the revisions said cities need a minimum of 20% of their land zoned commercial and 30% would be better. North Port had about 10% or less of its land zoned commercial before the commission made the move to alter its ULDC. The code, according to an earlier Daily Sun story, includes several changes for the city including:

- A modernized zoning map
- Streamlined development processes
- Clear zoning districts
- Enhanced sign regulation
- A natural resources section

The new directives make a clear framework for development — where it should take place and where natural settings will be, etc. Residents who showed up at the meeting where the changes were approved were vocal and passionate against many of the changes. They expressed concerns of businesses being developed in the middle of neighborhoods. And they criticized commissioners for not listening to their voices but relying on staff and outside influences to drive the bulk of the new codes. Mayor Alice White said it would be impossible to make everyone happy.

"I wish commissions from years ago made these kinds of decisions. Then we would not have to be addressing this the way we are now," White said, according to a Daily Sun story. A final bone of contention was how to notify residents if property near them — or property they might own — is being rezoned. There was no clear decision made on how to do that considering the enormous changes being made and how thousands of property owners will be impacted. We urge the city to come up with answers on how to do so efficiently and quickly.

Besides the long-term benefits these changes will result in, there is one more piece of good news that could soothe some concerns. Someone said to feel lucky if your residential lot is rezoned commercial, that it's suddenly worth more money. Whether that will soothe some bad vibes or not, the fact is North Port City Commission did its job and it's time to move on and embrace the changes.