

Staff Report

MASTER PLAN IN DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

February 14, 2012

Based on feedback received at a Council workshop with developers in April 2010, the City Council has requested a report on the feasibility of requiring that City Council review a Master Plan prior to submittal of a Preliminary Plat. Currently, a Master Plan is required to be submitted with a preliminary plat when zoning is requested to establish either a Suburban Residential Low Density (FS-RL) or Suburban Residential Medium Density (FS-RM) zoning district. (Ames *Municipal Code* Sections 29.1200(2b) and 29.1502 (5)). The only other instance when a Master Plan is required is when a major site development plan is proposed in the Northeast Gateway Overlay District. **While the Master Plan may be helpful in determining how the property will be ultimately developed, the requirement in its current form creates some burdens which this report addresses.**

Requirement for Master Plans

It appears that the Master Plan requirement was intended to allow the City Council to review and approve the design or layout of anticipated development before committing to a rezone of FS-RL or FS-RM, or before committing to a final site design in the Northeast Gateway Overlay District (O-GNE). As applied to the O-GNE, the master plan may help the Council ensure compliance with the overlay development and design standards. As applied to residential plats, it may facilitate some flexibility in determining how the plat will be laid out in terms of unit types and how the density requirement will be achieved at full build out.

Since its inception in 2000, the Master Plan requirement was applied to approval of the proposed mall on 13th Street. It has also been applied to all residential developments approved through a rezone to one of the FS-RL or FS-RM Suburban Residential Zoning Districts. These include the Northridge Heights, Sunset Ridge, The Reserve, Kinyon-Clark, and Southfork developments. Master Plans and Preliminary Plats were submitted, reviewed, and approved for each of these at the same time as the associated rezonings.

It does not appear that flexibility was necessary to facilitate the final layout of all these subdivisions. Most of them were developed with single-family attached and/or detached homes across the entire development that met the targeted density, within the standards of the FS-RL and FS-RM zoning districts. Therefore, it is not clear how the Master Plan added value to the approval process of these projects, since most of them met the specific requirements of the zoning and subdivision codes. Approval could have been rendered without reference to a specific design plan for the property to be rezoned. Indeed, that should be the case, since zoning confers the right to develop the property in any manner that meets the standards and codes of the City. Typically, zoning does not establish a particular project design. **If the City Council has confidence that adopted standards and codes are adequate to address the**

impacts and design of development, a Master Plan for a particular project would not typically be needed to make a zoning decision.

There may be situations where the City Council would not have this confidence, due to specific conditions that exist on or around a proposed development or rezone site, or due to situations that require more careful consideration of how the layout and design of a site affects general health, safety and welfare concerns. Therefore, under these limited conditions, a master plan could be needed. Indeed, these situations may apply to any type of rezone – not just rezones to FS-RL or FS-RM. Some examples follow.

1. The Land Use Policy Plan establishes targeted minimum densities for new residential development and the Zoning Ordinance implements this policy with a minimum net density for each of the “floating” zoning districts. In some cases, such as the Northridge Heights Subdivision, the targeted density is achieved by combining different unit types in the entire area. If the area is to be platted in phases, and specific plats might not meet the minimum density standards on their own, then an overall plan is needed at the beginning to establish how the minimum density target is to be achieved. In this manner, the low density of large lots at one end of a development might be balanced by the higher density of townhomes at the other end of the development.
2. The Land Use Policy Plan designates Convenience Commercial Nodes to be integrated into residential neighborhoods. An overall plan for an area may be needed to establish successful relationships among the locations and features of commercial uses, different residential unit types, parks or open space, and streets of different classifications. Thus, although the current requirement for a Master Plan applies only to the residential zoning districts and the O-GNE District, it may also have value when considering rezoning to commercial nodes or other zoning districts.
3. Sensitive environmental conditions or valuable natural resources may best be protected by a specific arrangement and placement of uses or by development features. For example, a wetland or archaeological site might be designated as part of an open space, and development might be clustered away from these natural features as far as possible or otherwise be separated by native plantings. An overall plan can establish these requirements at the time of rezoning, when these existing conditions are first identified.
4. Existing public improvements might be adequate to serve permitted uses if the development is designed a certain way. For example, an existing arterial street may need to be extended through a new development or a new collector street may need to connect to an existing arterial street in a specific location. A specific street pattern may avoid impacts on existing neighborhood streets. Also, new or upgraded public improvements, on-site or off-site, may be needed with the costs to be shared among different parties. An overall plan and development agreement would be needed at the time of rezoning.

Under these and other conditions, a Master Plan may be necessary to address site-specific concerns of a development prior to rezoning or final project approval. **Therefore, an alternative to the current master plan requirements might be for the City Council itself to determine, on a case by case basis, whether a master plan would have value. If so, the applicant would be required to prepare a Master Plan for review along with the rezoning request.**

Content of Master Plans

With regards to the contents of a Master Plan, this may not need to be as detailed as the code currently requires. **Under existing standards, the Master Plan must show the proposed arrangement and size of all proposed lots in almost the same detail as the information required on a Preliminary Plat. As an alternative to the current requirements, a more generalized approach to a Master Plan could be adopted.** This could have the plan show (a) existing site information, (b) areas in need of protection, (c) areas appropriate for development, (d) areas and quantities of different unit types, and (e) general pattern and connections required for an efficient transportation network. An example of such a plan is attached. **Under this approach, the higher level of detail currently required for Master Plans would be deferred to review of the preliminary plat or major site development plan, which could occur at a later date.**

Benefits of Requiring a Master Plan Where Deemed Appropriate

In cases where the Council has determined that a Master Plan is needed, the review process would give the staff, the public, Planning and Zoning Commission, and City Council the opportunity to determine, not only whether the proposed zone is consistent with the land use plan, but also to confirm that the general direction or style of the project is consistent with City policies. If not, the City could require changes to improve this consistency. Furthermore, undesirable impacts on the community could be identified so that the developer and the City can work together to determine how to mitigate any negative impacts.

The benefit to the developer is that it would reduce risk by securing approval of basic development parameters, such as the total number and type of residential units and/or the square footage of non-residential uses, before proceeding with expensive detailed engineering plans otherwise required during the subdivision or site plan process. This could mean significant cost savings to the developer.

This more generalized approach to the Master Plan could also result in cost savings if the approved preliminary plat later requires amendments, which is a fairly common need. With the current requirement that a Master Plan show the arrangement and shape of all lots, the City Council must also approve a revised Master Plan each time the plat is modified. For the Northridge Heights subdivision, each of these two drawing sets contained 11 sheets, and 17 drawing sets were required to be submitted. When revisions were needed in the development process, many times all 374 sheets were resubmitted. With a less detailed Master Plan, revisions to the Preliminary Plat could in

many cases be found consistent with the Master Plan, meaning that revisions to the Master Plan would be a much less frequent occurrence.

Tool for Implementation

It should be noted that a Master Plan would dictate a layout that might not otherwise be required by the Zoning Code. To insure that the development is built according to the Master Plan, therefore, a contract rezone would be appropriate so that the Master Plan is binding on future development.

Staff Comments

If Council would like to consider changes to the City's current Master Plan requirements, and instead consider the need for Master Plans on a case by case basis and/or the need to make Master Plans less detailed, staff could be directed to develop alternatives and to seek input from the development community, the public, and the Planning and Zoning Commission.

MASTER PLAN EXAMPLE

NorthRidge Heights Subdivision Master Plan

