

Staff Report

REQUEST FOR ZONING TEXT AMENDMENT FOR EXCEPTION TO MINIMUM FAR AND HEIGHT ALONG MAIN STREET

May 14, 2024

BACKGROUND:

On March 26th, the City Council referred to staff a zoning text amendment request from Mike Stott, representing Ames Silversmithing, to allow for his client to take advantage of a zoning exception process for their planned expansion. Ames Silversmithing desires to demolish the existing 1-story, 15-foot wide building at 218 Main Street that was recently acquired and to construct an addition to their existing structure. The property owner does not believe it is feasible to meet the minimum 1.0 Floor Area Ratio (FAR) and 2-story height requirements for the project they would like to build. After reviewing a staff memo regarding this request, the City Council asked that this request be placed on a future agenda to discuss.

The City Council has considered multiple requests for changes or exceptions to the minimum FAR (Floor Area Ratio) and height requirements in Downtown Service Center (DSC) over the past few years. City Council has previously stated a desire to keep the zoning standards that maintain the current Main Street character: a minimum two stories and a minimum 1.0 FAR. There are no other zoning design standards within DSC related to building design and its historic character.

Currently, there is an exception process available within DSC for a limited number of situations. Properties along the north edge of DSC with frontage along 6th Street can apply for an exception to be approved by the Zoning Board of Adjustment (ZBA). Additionally, special uses such as religious institutions and funeral facilities can request relief from the ZBA. The exception process considers the site situation, proposed design, and intent of the standards.

Staff also notes from discussion with the applicant that the recently directed 20% zoning variation relief proposal does not quite meet their goals for an addition. The two-story height of the building could likely be made to work, but the size of the addition would likely be less than a 20% reduction in the FAR standards to 0.8 FAR.

OPTIONS:

The property owner finds it impracticable to reuse the existing building for their purposes. The owner believes demolishing the existing structure and building a new addition is more appealing. Staff identified three options that could apply to the request.

1. Eliminate the FAR and 2-Story Height Requirement

City Council has modified zoning standards at least three times for DSC zoning due to the minimum FAR and Height requirements. Previously, City Council did not totally eliminate the standard due to the belief that it helps to reinforce the building design and character of historic Main Street.

Deleting the standard would apply to all properties in Downtown. This change would grant more flexibility to property owners for additions to existing buildings and for new buildings. Changing the standard may allow for small additions and changes to buildings that may not be feasible under the current requirements.

Although the FAR and height requirements are not fine-grained design standards, deleting the standards would leave no design requirements within the DSC zoning related to the historic Main Street character. Council could direct staff to use the Downtown Façade Guidelines as design requirements for review of projects as a substitute for the standards if the FAR and Height standards are deleted.

If City Council were to delete the requirements, Ames Silversmithing would then proceed with only a staff review of a Minor Site Development Plan to demolish their 15-foot building and construct an addition.

2. Allow for all building additions, regardless of use, to be eligible to apply for an Exception approved by the ZBA

The applicant requested this option believing their specific circumstances would justify granting an exception rather than removing the standard in its entirety. **The text amendment would simply remove the current limitation that allows exceptions only to properties along 6th Street. This change would then apply throughout the Downtown for all properties and uses when it is an addition to an existing building.**

This option would require a property owner to demonstrate on a case-by-case basis why compliance would not be feasible, and if the proposed design would be compatible with the character of Downtown. This is the process that was created and applied to the Friedrich Realty building on 6th and Duff.

Note that this option is based upon the current exception language of Ames Municipal Code Section 29.808 (2) which only applies to additions and not to new construction of a building on a site.

3. Apply the 20% Zoning Variation Rule

As mentioned above, the City Council has already initiated a city-wide text amendment to allow for 20% variation from numeric zoning standards. Although this change has not yet been adopted, it is scheduled for City Council consideration on June 11 .

In this case, the 20% Rule would lower the minimum building height from requiring two actual floors with usable area or a height of 22 feet to a building height of 17.6 feet measured to the top of the parapet. The FAR would be reduced from 1.0 (100%) to 0.8 (80%).

Staff reviewed this option with the applicant before they asked for the Council referral. They estimated that they would need to make their addition slightly larger to meet this variation allowance, potentially increasing the FAR from approximately 75% to the 80%.

If the City Council desired this approach, then the Council would take no action on the Ames Silversmithing request at this time. The 20% rule ordinance will return for City Council approval June 11. The applicant could then proceed with a site design that complies with these 20% reductions and no other amendment would be needed.

STAFF COMMENTS:

Alternations of existing one-story buildings downtown are often restricted by the current FAR and height requirements. However, these standards are meant to reinforce Downtown character and for efficient infill development. The City Council will have to weigh the need for the keeping the standards or agreeing to modify them as described in Option 1 or 2. Option 3 would require no further action by the City Council.

ATTACHMENT(S):

[Attachment A - Letter from SB&A.pdf](#)

[Attachment B - DSC Map.pdf](#)