

Feelings mixed about home day care

By Joanne Maliszewski
staff writer

It was more of the same. Child day care opponents offered the same complaints as they have for the last few months in an effort to prevent professional baby-sitting in their neighborhoods.

And proponents were no less ardent in sticking to their reasons for demanding that the Farmington Hills City Council allow family and group child day care homes in subdivisions.

In both cases, the city council's public hearing Monday could have been a recorded version of an earlier public hearing before the Farmington Hills Planning Commission in February.

Opponents spoke about what could happen if day care was allowed in their neighborhoods. Devolved property, noise, increased traffic and bottlenecks were the major complaints offered. Residents also continued to argue that it is a business — not a social benefit or service — that infringes on the neighborhood's integrity as a residential area.

"Make no mistake about this. This is a business," said resident Sam Rolick, adding that increased traffic and noise will result from in-home day care. If day care — a profitable business — is allowed, it will open the door for other neighborhood businesses, he said.

"I AM concerned about property

values," said resident Herb Duffenbaugh.

If 12 children — the maximum number allowed in a group home — live next door, property values will decrease, he said. "I don't want eight, 10, 12 kids living next to me."

Other opponents asked the council to leave the zoning ordinance as is with all day care activity restricted to a major road. The original ordinance was great, said resident John Mueller.

He also said the new amendment would be acceptable as long as the larger, group homes are restricted to major or secondary roads.

Leading the proponents was Darlene Feldman, whose group home on Minglenwood Lane in the Glenbrook subdivision, sparked debate over the city's lack of an ordinance addressing in-home child day care.

"WE HAVE heard a lot of fears and speculation as far as what's going to happen," Feldman said. The "fears and speculation are based on what if . . .," she added.

Feldman specifically addressed the location of group homes on major or secondary roads, as required by the proposed amendment. "The bottom line is there is no documentation these group homes have infringed on the integrity of the neighborhood," she said.

The child care advocate compared the Farmington Hills Public Schools' location of elementary schools in the heart of many Farmington Hills

neighborhoods. The schools, children and accompanying traffic is not considered disruptive. The traffic from group homes, such as hers, would be far less than with the elementary schools, Feldman said.

"Don't throw the baby out with the

wash water," she added.

The city's only other licensed group day care home operator, Lynne Strachan, also spoke to the attempts to prohibit these homes from neighborhoods.

Strachan told the council of a neighbor who is opening a group home, but who does not want a state license because she doesn't want the city to know what she is doing.

"By limiting group homes the way you choose to do only penalizes those

who are operating within the law," Strachan said.

Without group homes, Strachan continued, the number of family day care homes would double "because the demand is there."

6-1 vote

Home day care amendment introduced

Continued from Page 1

adoption within the next few weeks. Councilman Joe Alkateeb questioned the planning commission's rationale for requiring group homes on major or secondary roads and suggested including them in subdivisions. But he voted for the amendment.

RESIDENTS ALSO appeared confused by the council's expressed concern for the city's two licensed group home operators — whose homes are in subdivisions — and then did nothing about it.

Councilwoman Jan Dolan asked that city staff and attorney Paul Beau research conditions under which the existing group homes can remain where they are in light of the zoning amendment.

If the introduced amendment becomes law, group home operators whose homes are on subdivision streets such as the one owned by Darlene Feldman — who drew publicity to the need for home day care — would be operating illegally.

Specifically, the amendment calls for allowing family day care for a maximum six children and the provider must be the occupant of the home, licensed by the state and registered with the city. Family day care homes would be limited to operating from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., must be at least 500 feet from another and cannot have signs advertising the service.

Greater restrictions would be imposed on group day care homes, which have been considered the most controversial because operators can care for a maximum 12 children, ac-

cording to state law.

THE PROPOSED amendment would require all group day care homes to be on major or secondary roads — not along subdivision streets. Group homes also must operate under the same regulations required of family homes.

The council's action upheld planning commissioners' earlier recommendation amendment with one exception — Board of Zoning Appeals (ZBA) review for group home operators.

Most council members agreed that they would prefer group home operators to be reviewed by planning commissioners.

Councilwoman Joan Dudley referred to a letter to the council from Dwan Whinnery, ZBA secretary, which said that ZBA members have

continuously denied variance requests for home occupations when an employee is necessary. Under state law, group home operators are required to have an employee.

Feldman, in fact, was denied a variance by the ZBA earlier this year to allow her to offer child care for up to 12 children.

DUDLEY SUGGESTED deleting the ZBA review requirement for group homes. "Anybody who did so (request a ZBA variance) is apparently dead meat before they get a vote. I don't think that's fair."

It's the city council's "duty to protect" proponents from "being thrown in front of that board with no hope of success," Dudley said.

Other council members agreed. "I don't want the ZBA to have anything to do with this," Marks said.

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