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Twenty-Five Cents

Issue for the '80s: Downsized housing

By Joanne Maliszewski
staff writer

What to do about downsizing — building smaller houses in unfinished subdivisions that boast larger, more expensive houses — could pit some Farmington Hills homeowners against area developers and builders.

While homeowners, particularly in the Foxmoor and Springbrook subdivisions, where smaller homes are being built, are demanding a city ordinance to control house size and architecture, developers are claiming an ordinance would be a bane to their financial existence. In fact, developers would prefer no ordinance at all.

"Downsizing is a thing that is coming now," said Frank Whitten, developer and attorney, claiming that it is becoming increasingly difficult to sell the larger, more expensive homes.

Even though builders still are building homes that are larger than the city's minimum-size requirements, the new houses are smaller than existing homes in Farmington Hills' unfinished subdivisions.

But homeowners claim the smaller homes in the subdivisions will bring down the value of their larger homes. So they favor a proposed Farmington Hills ordinance, based on a Nov. 1971 ordinance, designed to establish controls over the size, architecture and

landscaping of homes in single-family housing districts.

ALTHOUGH CITY attorney Paul Bibeau presented City Council Monday with a draft of a proposed ordinance, council members did not take action. Instead, they asked Bibeau to meet with builders, developers and homeowners to draft an ordinance that could satisfy all concerned parties.

The group, which was not selected at Monday's meeting, will have its first meeting this afternoon. Several meetings are expected before the ordinance is fully revised. But a public hearing will precede the proposed ordinance's adoption.

"Very candidly, they (builders and developers) were upset with the speed at which council has moved ahead with this," Bibeau said, referring to his draft of the proposed ordinance.

Bibeau announced that builders and developers should be involved in drafting a more specific and precise ordinance because they will be working under the restrictions listed in the new ordinance.

But angry homeowners also asked to be involved in firming-up Bibeau's draft.

"I don't feel it is appropriate for one side to meet with Mr. Bibeau when the other side is not present," said Foxmoor resident Werner Siebert.

Concern about the trend toward downsizing surfaced in May, when homeowners in the Ivy Wistow Estates appealed to the Farmington Hills City Council for help.

WHEN HOMEOWNERS again expressed concern to the council on June 13, city officials agreed to study the problem and consider drafting an ordinance similar to the Nov. 1971 ordinance.

While homeowners seemed pleased with Bibeau's efforts, many pointed out that some of the restrictions, such as prohibiting a house that is "not less than 75 percent of the average floor area of the single family dwellings" within 750 feet (in all directions) of existing houses, should be expanded to perhaps 80 or 85 percent of the average floor area.

Homeowners also wanted to know what would happen if existing houses were more than 750 feet away from a new house.

The proposed ordinance also calls for "certain minimum architectural standards of appearance in conformity with surrounding structures." But some also may not be "substantially dissimilar to the architectural appeal and functionalism of the single family dwellings within the surrounding area."

According to Bibeau's draft, a reviewing official, most likely the director of public services, would determine whether a new house is the proper size and architectural style of the neighborhood. Developers or builders who disagree with the reviewing official's determination could appeal their case to a proposed three-member Single Family Residential Review Board.

"If I knew an ordinance like this existed in the city I would not come into it (Farmington Hills)," Whitten said. "I could have a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and Yamasaki that couldn't pass that ordinance — and it (the house) would be worth millions."

WHITTEN TOLD council members that the plan of adopting an ordinance as an amendment to the city code rather than as an amendment to the zoning ordinances could cripple the housing industry, particularly because of delays that might be involved with the suggested appeal process called for in the proposed ordinance.

"Downsizing was a major point that brought this to a head," Whitten said, indicating that aesthetics, architecture and landscaping have little to do with homeowners' complaints.

But Whitten also indicated that homeowners have their facts wrong when they assume the value of their larger homes will drop when smaller houses are built nearby.

"I do not know where that comes from," he said, adding the only way a house's value could drop is if a neighbor's house is unsightly.



The cross at Salem United Church was saved by Farmington firefighters after the steeple was struck by lightning and set on fire.

Lightning strikes steeple and drives bats from belfry

By Diane Gale
and Joanne Maliszewski
staff writers

It could have been a scene from a gothic novel.

Under Monday's dark, stormy skies, lightning struck the 81-year-old steeple of Farmington's Salem United Church of Christ, setting the tower's shingles afire.

And as Farmington and Farmington Hills' fire fighters made their way to the top of the steeple, bats hurriedly escaped the burning belfry.

"It looks like the bats might be flying out of there with their young," said onlooker Andy Lucas, pointing to the bats flying in nearby trees.

Lucas, a construction worker, was working a few houses west of the church, near the intersection of Oakland and Grand River when lightning struck the roof shingles just below the hollow, metal steeple cross just before 4 p.m.

"It was loud. I never heard anything that loud before," Lucas said. "Everything just kind of lit up."

The Rev. Lee Tyler, church pastor, said he was looking out the window when he saw "a red flash. I sensed that something had been hit. I had a feeling it was the steeple."

Darlene Lane, who was sitting on her front porch around the corner from the church, saw the bolt of lightning strike the steeple.

"It was terrible," she said. "It was huge, enormous and extremely loud. It's amazing it hasn't been hit before."

MONDAY'S FIRE was not the first time the church had been on fire, according to a history of the Salem United church. In June 1922, lightning struck the church causing considerable damage.

Although most onlookers immediately

noticed smoke, Farmington deputy director of public safety Frank Lauboff said the fire started inside the tower, burning through two to three layers of shingles.

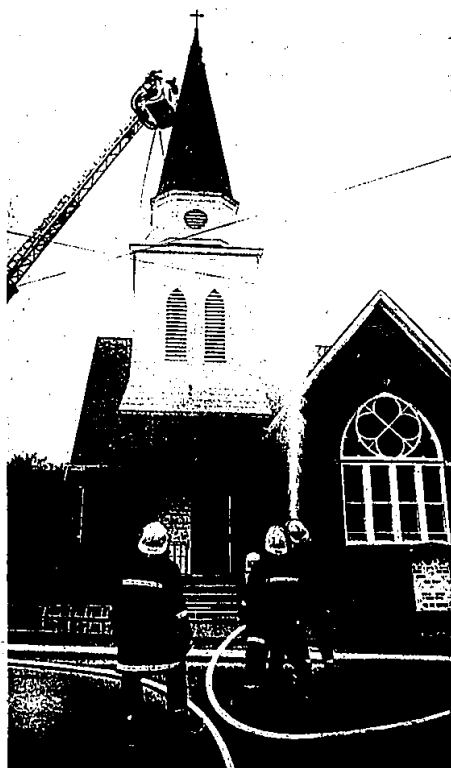
"It does not appear it (lightning) struck the cross," Lauboff said. "If it had there would have been a lot more damage."

The day after the fire, Tyler still was unsure how many dollars worth of damage the fire caused.

"It's been a little difficult for an insurance claims adjuster to get up there because of the rain," Tyler said, referring to checking out the damage caused to the church tower.

No injuries were reported although onlookers and fire fighters occasionally backed away from the church as burning embers fell from the tower.

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Firefighters from Farmington and Farmington Hills banded together to reach the fire high on top of the Salem United Church of Christ.

Mopeds get new look under law

By Diane Gale
staff writer

Controversy over mopeds, a motor vehicle popular among teen-agers, continues to brew, and adding to the fire is a new law which allows 15-year-olds to ride what was once considered a motorcycle.

"The laws were changed because of the motorcycle dealer lobby," according to Farmington Hills police Lt. Ernest Miller. "There's no push by law enforcement to make them go faster, that's for sure."

Much of the reason mopeds are popular among teen-agers is because 15-year-olds are allowed to drive the motor vehicles if they have a special moped license. Older moped operators must have a driver's license.

"We're finding a lot (of moped operators) are under 15, and by law they can't operate them," Miller said.

The new law became effective June 16 and it redefines the characteristics of mopeds. It also mandates operators under 19 wear helmets.

The allowable maximum speed for the vehicles increased from 25 miles per hour to 30 miles per hour, acceptable horsepower is raised from 1.5 to 2 horsepower, and the requirement to have movable pedals has been lifted.

BEFORE THE law was enacted the major difference between mopeds and motorcycles was that the moped had a pedal start. The moped operator had to pedal the vehicle much like pedaling a bicycle before the motor would kick on.

Safety rules governing moped operators is a major concern among law officials because of an increase in accidents.

During 1978 in Michigan, there were 147 reported moped accidents with 122 persons injured and one person killed. In 1982 that statistic jumped to 482 reported accidents for an increase of 227 percent.

Injuries climbed to 469 in 1982 for a 300-percent increase over 1978 and two persons were killed, according to Michigan State Police Community Services Officer Robert Garcia.

"An increase in speed could increase the degree of injury in an accident," said Deputy Director of Public Safety Frank Lauboff. "We can show statistically when you have a speed problem there's a higher injury and accident rate."

And most of those injured are teen-agers, according to police officials.

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oral quarrel

What would you change in our Constitution

Come this weekend Americans will set out to celebrate the Fourth of July. This once patriotic holiday has now become just another one of this country's three-day weekends.

So for this week's Oral Quarrel we would like to harken back to that patriotic spirit before you run off to the family picnic or the cottage by asking the following question:

WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE IN OR ADD TO THE U.S. CONSTITUTION TO MAKE IT BETTER?

To answer this question call Oral Quarrel at 477-5498. You will have until 11 p.m. on Friday to answer this question. Look in the next issue of the Observer to see how your neighbors feel about this issue.

what's inside

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HOME DELIVERY . 591-0500

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