

High rise or low? Cities ponder

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THE DECISION to restrict building heights, or to allow high-rises, tends to be made based on public opinion rather than facts and figures.

Along Northwestern Highway in Farmington Hills, for example, building height is restricted to 30 feet plus another 10 for an equipment penthouse, zoning supervisor Hal Howe said.

Developers along the 12 Mile corridor are allowed to build up to 40 feet, plus an additional 10 for the roof-top equipment.

"The philosophy has been low profile since township days," Rowe said. "That's what the city fathers envisioned."

Howe pointed to the Farmington Hills charter as a root of the low-profile philosophy. The charter defines the residential wish to maintain a semi-rural tradition.

SOUTHFIELD'S SKY line, on the other hand, is not rooted in tradition. "Southfield has been, for the most part, reared on request," Henkle said, referring to individual requests from developers.

Farmington Hills, however, has sought to avoid that type of development.

The historic consent judgments along Northwestern came out of residential, township and city resistance to whole-

sale commercial rezoning. Northwestern's 30-foot height limit came about after the slew of consent judgments that eventually led to the city's restrictive OS-3 ordinance.

"I don't think the community (Farmington Hills) wants the same atmosphere that exists along the expressway in Southfield or along Big Beaver in Troy," said developer David Johnson, owners of the Pine Ridge Office Center on Northwestern.

"The concept of the height restriction is to keep the residential flavor of Farmington Hills," he said.

THAT SENTIMENT has been echoed with every new push in Farmington Hills to raise building height limitations.

At the core of the height controversy is the question: Will increasing height, with its accompanying problems, be worth the potential increase in tax revenues?

That question recently resurfaced when Councilwoman Jan Dolan requested a study to determine how much tax revenue would be generated by high-rise, as opposed to low-rise, buildings. The proposed study would have been based on increased building heights of 10 and 20 feet in industrial and large office zones. But a majority of council members disagreed, arguing the study's cost was not worth its potential findings.

Former fire chief charged

embezzlement charge in the past year. Last March, Anne DeJorge was charged on felony charges in connection with the alleged misappropriation of \$2,300 from the city finance department.

DeJorge of Farmington awaits an Aug. 24 probable cause hearing before Judge Michael Hand of the 47th District Court.

A similar study, however, was completed several years ago under the auspices of the city's Economic Development Corporation (EDC). "Quite frankly, our study showed we are at an optimum height," said former charter commissioner Robert McConnell, EDC chairman.

A TALL BUILDING, McConnell said, brings its own problems. The need for additional parking (taking up more land without the benefit of intensive use), necessary fire equipment to reach tall buildings and accompanying traffic congestion cost money, he said.

"The higher you go, the costs are cheaper for the developer-builder. But it doesn't get cheaper for the community." A city must consider additional parking and traffic as well as fire protection needs, he said.

"The cost-effectiveness (of the current height limits) to the community is just about right. Height does increase the value of buildings. But providing

parking (for the taller buildings) offsets it. So there is no great benefit to be derived."

Rowe agreed. "Just because you go up higher, it's going to take up more land because of the parking (requirements)," Rowe said. "If you go up higher, you would get more from that building. But not as much from the land (with a parking lot on it)."

CITY PLANNER Claude Coates approaches the issue from a somewhat different perspective.

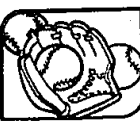
"Additional height can mean additional revenue. But assuming buildings are built at a greater height... the difference (in tax revenue) is not in direct proportion to the height," Coates said.

"Yes. Increased height should bring more revenue (to the city in taxes) per acre. How much? I don't know. I don't have any numbers."

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