

Guidelines set for lifting of builder's permit ban

By Joanne Maliszewski
staff writer

After more than two hours of discussion Monday night, the Farmington Hills City Council edged closer to lifting restrictions imposed last week on Keating Community Homes for reported problems with ditches, roads, drainage and grading.

The city council agreed to lift restrictions on further inspections for Howard Keating's construction firm within the week when city officials are satisfied that all necessary improvements are complete.

Lifting the restriction on building permits, however, will remain in council members' hands. A report documenting Keating's progress and a staff recommendation will be given to the council Monday, April 4.

If council members are satisfied that problems are not likely with future Keating house sites, they are expected to lift restrictions on building permits.

Council members insist that no public comments will be heard next week when they receive the staff report.

"He's got to at least get all the lots he's got under construction up to an acceptable level," assistant city manager David Call said.

Keating has two completed houses on Karen Place at Nine Mile and

five unfinished sites on Elm Grove, north of Nine Mile and east of Middlebelt.

COUNCIL MEMBERS Jan Dolan and Ben Marks preferred leaving the decision to lift restrictions on both inspections and permits in the city staff's hands.

"If we don't have confidence in the staff, we should change the staff," Dolan said.

Keating demanded to speak publicly Monday after not being invited to the meeting March 21 when the city council restricted further inspections and new building permits for Keating.

"It's too bad we were found guilty without the opportunity to talk," Keating said Monday night.

Keating still considers the city council's actions unfair. "I don't think it's fair the permits are going to be delayed," he said.

Other builders in Farmington Hills receive red stop-work tags on their houses when a problem occurs rather than the type of restrictions the council has placed on Keating Community Homes, the builder said. The city council did not place stop-work orders on any of Keating's houses.

The biggest key is what city councilman Ben Marks had to say," Keating said Tuesday morning.

Marks, who was absent last week when the council imposed restrictions on Keating, took exception to the issue coming again before council. "Why are we recriminating this man?" he asked.

Marks told his colleagues that problems with builders should be funneled through the city staff, not the city council. "I don't think it had to come up to this room, this table, because these are not extraordinary measures," Marks said.

OTHER CITY officials said that city staff tried to solve the problems but complaints from residents continued. City manager William Costick said that perhaps the city's response was not timely.

City staff reported Monday that Keating has made progress in clearing

up problems with the sites in the Nine Mile-Middlebelt area since restrictions were imposed March 21.

"There has been considerable work done out there," community development manager Richard Lampi said.

Additional ditching and placement of straw bales have helped dry the area and regrading has been done. But final grading is still to be done, Lampi said.

A city surveying crew was expected to check the grade of Keating's two completed houses on Karen Place at Nine Mile Tuesday morning.

The survey is expected to determine whether the two Keating house sites are higher in elevation than an abutting residence, the owner of

which has complained that her backyard has flooded since the two manufactured houses were erected.

"The lot has dried up considerably," the resident told council members, referring to Keating's recent soil erosion measures.

Lampi agreed. "He's taken measures of eliminating that water. The site needs to receive a final grade."

ON MONDAY, Keating documented his efforts in solving reported problems with drainage, damaged roads and ditching. He suggested that city staff take a water sample of the ponding in the abutting neighbor's backyard.

"Our drainage is not coming from our lot to her lot," Keating said. "It appears to be some sort of a sewer

or septic problem in her backyard."

The resident later told council she does not have a septic tank.

The city council last week placed an immediate hold on new building permits or inspections for existing Keating houses. Specifically, the restrictions were placed on Keating following reports of torn up roads, blocked drainage ditches and roads blocked by construction equipment.

Keating also is charged with violating noise ordinances as well as after hours and Sunday construction ordinances.

Suspensions that the two houses on Karen Place were used as models also prompted the anger of residents and city officials, who previously told Keating such use violates city ordinances.

Hills man recounts confusion, panic after wing fire on plane

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"I had just unbuckled my belt and picked up my briefcase," Shoup said. "I turned around and saw people getting up and going into aisles."

"About that time, I heard someone calling out to evacuate the plane. At first, everybody hesitated. But by the time they moved into the aisle, there was the smell of smoke."

The captain didn't order them to do so, but passengers quickly began to evacuate.

Shoup moved to the front door and slid down the inflatable chute. "A flight attendant was there directing people to jump," he said. "Almost everybody got off without a great deal of difficulty."

After waiting in the cold for 45

minutes, uninjured passengers were taken by bus to Northwest's main terminal and invited to the Northwest World Club, a VIP lounge.

But delay loomed for a few more hours. Shoup didn't leave the airport until 11:30 p.m. "I waited all that time to get my carry-on baggage and a bag I checked as well," he said.

THE DRAMA unfolded when, while on the taxiway, the captain of the Boeing 727 routinely turned on a backup engine that runs the air conditioning, electrical and other systems when the plane is on the ground. The unit is near the main wheel well.

Fuel injected into the unit caused a backfire, briefly igniting residual

vapors, which occasionally happens. A ball of flame spewed from the unit's exhaust vent near the right wing, Northwest Airlines and Federal Aviation Administration officials said.

Despite the scare, Shoup, who logs more than 50,000 miles a year in the air, has no intention of flying less. "It was the first time I've ever had to evacuate a plane," he said.

Shoup said he and his wife, Linda, have no qualms about flying Northwest Airlines to Phoenix with their two children for a family vacation.

As he put it: "You see accidents on the highway all the time and don't stop driving. If you consider the odds, flying is a relatively safe way to travel."



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