

Zoning change could boost Gateway area

◆ The Planning Board meets at 7 p.m. to discuss an overlay zoning district proposed by the Reviviedo Gateway Initiative.

By Ethan Forman
Staff Writer

LAWRENCE — Under what some call the city's "arcane" zoning laws, artists cannot live where they paint or sculpt, and mill owners cannot create a mix of shops, apartments and businesses.

Biotech firms can only use half their space for manufacturing. And multifamily homeowners simply looking to replace siding, alter windows or build porches can trigger the hassle of securing a special permit.

The 6-month-old Reviviedo Gateway Initiative wants to change all that by creating an overlay zoning district.

The idea is to create a more flexible way to permit homes and businesses in an effort to revive the North Common Neighborhood's housing stock, and pump up economic activity in an area that contains mammoth, but under-used mills. These mills could serve artists seeking studios and a haven from pricey Boston rents. But zoning laws do not allow artists to live where they work.

Tonight at 7, the Planning Board meets in City Council chambers in City Hall to decide whether to place a new set of zoning rules over old ones in the North Common Neighborhood, a portion of the downtown and the Gateway area off Interstate 495.

The new rules might provide some relief to homeowners.

"They don't allow you to rehab your house," said Sandra Mouzon, who has owned a historic row house on Orchard Street for 11 years. "You have to get a special permit," said Mouzon, a member of the Reviviedo initiative's steering committee. Construction of row or townhouses is not permitted in the area of the city where Mouzon lives.

Lawrence, the partner with Lawrence CommunityWorks in the Reviviedo Gateway Initiative.

The area up for the overlay zone encompasses the North Common Neighborhood bordered by Jackson Street to the west and the Spicket River to the east; the downtown business district south and east of Campagnone Common; the Gateway project area off Marston Street; the massive Everett Mill, and the mills on the eastern half of The Island from Amesbury Street to the Spicket.

"This is not going to change Lawrence overnight," said Andre Leroux, a neighborhood planner with Lawrence CommunityWorks. "What we are doing is putting out a welcome mat for economic development."

The City Council will have the final say on the plan, which Leroux said does not change existing zoning, but allows for a new set of zoning rules over the old ones.

"All we want is basically a common sense zoning overlay," he said.

The proposed rules provide for affordable housing for apartment buildings with 20 or more units, and they allow homes to be built on lots as small as 5,000-square-foot. The current requirement is 10,000 square feet.

Also under the city's "arcane" regulations, Leroux said biotechnology companies are required to obtain a special permit. Their manufacturing floor space cannot exceed 50 percent.

But most biotech firms are mostly made up of manufacturing space, Leroux said. Other changes would allow for publishing, printing and sign-making establishments, which are no longer ink-based, and which are prohibited.

Planning Board Chairman Leslie P. Bernal did not want to comment before the meeting, but he commended Reviviedo for their outreach.

"They have worked very hard to get a lot of neighborhood input as well as input from the area business leaders," Bernal said. "It deserves very serious consideration."

The new regulations were not conceived in a vacuum, Reviviedo planners said.

"This zoning came from the vision of what this community could be," said Maggie Super, associate director of Groundwork

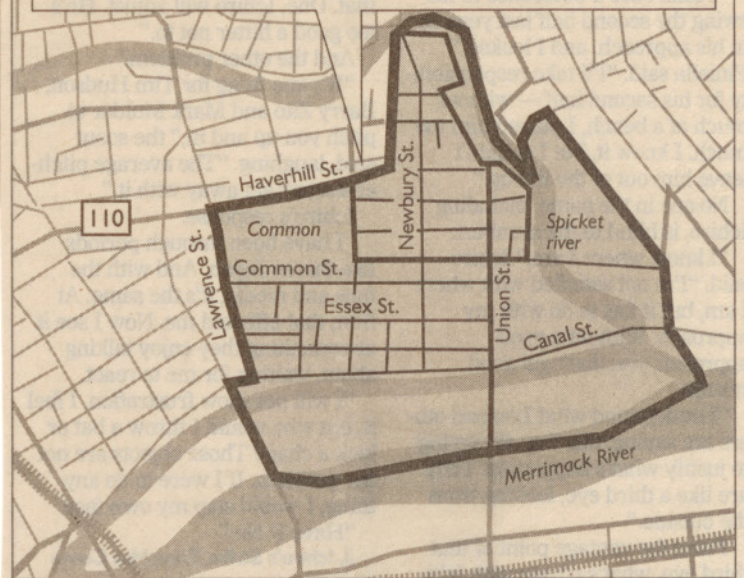
And Bernal defended some of the past logic of the city's zoning rules.

"It's not necessarily arcane ... mills were traditionally zoned as

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PROPOSED LAWRENCE ZONING CHANGES

The Reviviedo Gateway Overlay District (shaded area) would make a number of changes to zoning for homes, businesses and mills in the North Common Neighborhood. The Lawrence Planning Board meets tonight at 7 p.m. on the changes.



Fran Landry/Staff graphic

Gateway: Changes sought

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industrial properties and it made sense many years ago not to have houses mixed in with heavy industrial uses," Bernal said.

He acknowledged it may be time for a change, but said the board must tread lightly.

"There is certainly much opportunity to make our zoning ordinances more efficient," he said.

Reviviedo's zoning plan came before the Planning Board last month. But questions were raised about requirements to allow for fewer parking spaces for a two-bedroom apartment, 1½ instead of 2.

The group backed off and decided not to change off-street parking requirements, except the zoning would not allow parking in front yards.

The new requirements would allow off-site parking requirements be met through the use long term lease for a parking facility within 1,000 feet of a home.

The word "Reviviedo" is Spanish for renewal in a nod to Lawrence's mostly Latino community. The initiative grew out of neighborhood focus groups held as work has moved forward on the Lawrence Gateway Project.

That project is a long-awaited transformation of the city's "gateway" along Interstate 495.

Leroux said Reviviedo wants to stitch the Gateway project to the neighborhoods, so that it becomes more than just a commuter parking lot off a highway.

"By focusing on the people side of the equation, you can be a lot more productive," Leroux said.