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Commission rejects proposed Woman's Exchange expansion

After an extended appeal from Laurel Park residents who argued the project clashed with its surroundings, the city reversed staff's approval of plans to expand the Woman's Exchange.

By **David Conway** | 9:42 p.m. April 11, 2016



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It took one week and two meetings, but the City Commission has finally rendered its first-ever verdict on an appeal regarding administrative approval of a site plan — and, in a split decision, the board reversed city staff's decision to permit the proposed [expansion of the Woman's Exchange](#).

The discussion and decision highlighted an ongoing divide between new development and neighborhood activists working to maintain the existing character of residential areas. The Laurel Park Neighborhood Association had appealed the issuance of a building permit for the project, which would be located at 526 Rawls Ave.

The 3,524-square-foot single-story structure would be located just northeast of the current Woman's Exchange building at 539 S. Orange Ave. That [building would be used](#) to improve the operational flow of the nonprofit consignment shop, and a new loading area along Rawls would be used so customers could pick up and drop off larger items.

The loading area was the major point of contention for Laurel Park representatives, who argued the new use would be [incompatible with the adjacent residential neighborhood](#). City staff issued a building permit for the project in November, and the Planning Board voted 4-1 to uphold that decision during a previous appeal in January.

Kate Lowman, speaking on behalf of the Laurel Park Neighborhood Association, said the project was an imposition on people living in the nearby Balcony and Spanish Point apartment buildings, and that the creation of the Laurel Park Overlay District called for a higher standard when reviewing the Woman's Exchange's plans.

“People are watching to see: Does our motto about ‘small town feeling’ mean anything?” — Kate Lowman

She also invoked a recurring strain of concern that new development in the city is often detrimental to the existing character of surrounding areas.

“People are watching to see: Does our motto about ‘small town feeling’ mean anything?” Lowman said.

Representatives for the Woman's Exchange said their proposal was the only feasible plan under the current city zoning regulations — that existing regulations required a loading area on Rawls. They cited the approval of Tim Litchet, the city's director of neighborhood and development services, as evidence supporting their interpretation of the code.

They also pointed to the conditions placed on staff's approval of the project — most significantly, that the loading zone could be used for no more than 12 pickups and drop-offs per day. With that regulation in mind, they said



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residents' fears about potential disruptions and safety issues were unfounded.

"We think these conditions are pretty stringent — you might even say severe," said Brenda Patten, a land use attorney representing the Woman's Exchange.

In the end, the commission voted 3-2 to reverse the prior approval of the project, preventing the Woman's Exchange from moving forward with its plans to expand. Vice Mayor Suzanne Atwell and Commissioner Liz Alpert voted against the reversal.

Commissioner Susan Chapman — who has criticized staff in the past for granting approval to new projects — said Monday's decision was an important acknowledgement of broader impact developments have on their surroundings.

"We have a neighborhood chapter in our code, and that chapter is viewed to be important and significant," Chapman said "Not every development that is applied for has the right to get an expansion, particularly when it has an impact on neighborhoods."

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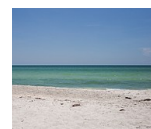
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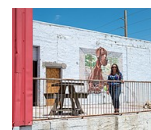
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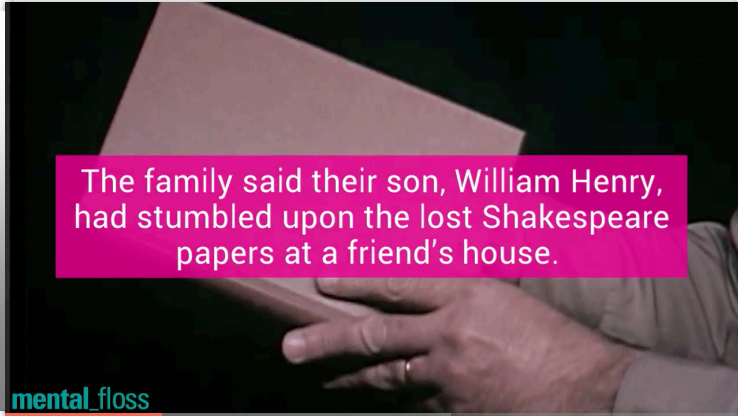
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