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Zoning change recommended

By Eric C. Deines

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CONCORD - The Concord Planning and Zoning Commission unanimously agreed on a zoning amendment that will allow for a controversial \$60 million drag strip at Lowe's Motor Speedway.

The recommended zoning change comes after the planning board agreed in September to remove drag strips as a potential use from the Speedway Public Interest District.

Concord City Council asked the planning board to reverse the decision earlier this month, a move that will need final approval from City Council next week.

"I don't think that any of us like to make a decision and retract it," said Terry Derner, a planning board member. "Speedway staff was more than convincing that they are willing to work with the city (on noise abatement design and race schedules). We felt like we needed to start again before there was any more miscommunication."

Concord City Council will act on the planning board's recommendation at 6 p.m. on Friday, Oct. 26, when there is a public hearing planned on the matter.

That meeting was originally planned for Oct. 24, but a legal notice did not run on Sunday, pushing the date back.

On Oct. 1, and to a room of concerned nearby residents, City Council agreed to remove drag strips from the list of suggested use for the Speedway Public Interest District.

Many residences sit within a half-mile of the site proposed for the drag strip, and residents there feared the noise generated by the facility would negatively impact their quality of life.

In response, Speedway head Bruton Smith said he would spend \$350 million to move the entire Speedway facility out of Concord. Smith's comments got the interest of the Charlotte region and gained worries from Cabarrus racing fans, residents, business leaders, tourism officials and politicians.

A week later, City Council asked the city's planning and zoning board to put the wheels in motion to reverse the zoning amendment and also agreed to explore tax incentive grants for the drag strip and future Speedway improvements.

The improvements to the Speedway have been estimated to be \$200 million.



This aerial photo shows Lowe's Motor Speedway, right, the dirt track, center, and the site of the proposed drag strip, behind the dirt track. Behind the site is the Riverwalk community, of which residents have expressed concerns over noise and fumes.

Bridgett Baker / bbaker@independenttribune.com

Smith was not available for comment Tuesday.

But Jerry Gappens, the Speedway's senior vice president of events, said the planning board's vote is yet another step in the right direction for the city.

"It's a step necessary to get back to where we were two weeks ago before they acted on the zoning," Gappens said. "Mr. Smith is very much aware of Concord and what they're putting together."

Smith has been urged to remain in Cabarrus by an array of political figures, tourism officials and others.

Gappens said Smith would make "no formal decision on that until after council votes next Friday."

Mayor Scott Padgett said he was sorry to put the planning and zoning board in the position they were in, but that it was necessary to rectify the situation.

"My goal is to resolve this," said Padgett, a former planning board member. "The speedway, I hope, is going to be here long after I'm gone. I'm focused on the long-term good for the the whole city."

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