

City of Janesville Zoning and Subdivision Code Rewrite

Focus Group Interviews - Summary Memo

Overview and Executive Summary:

GRAEF/CiviTek conducted ten (10) focus group interviews with 38 individuals in small groups on four days between August 20-28, 2024. Focus groups were 60 minutes long and centered on issues and opportunities related to the code rewrite(s). Half of the focus group sessions were held in-person at the Janesville Hedberg Public Library. The remaining sessions were held virtually. Focus group participants spanned a range of backgrounds including local representatives, builders, developers, business owners, and advocates from local organizations. The focus groups did not include City staff. Separate meetings with staff have been conducted and will continue throughout project duration. This summary includes key findings from the focus groups, including where there was broad consensus or differing opinions.

Summary of Key Themes and Comments:

General

The focus group discussions highlighted both concerns and opportunities for the development of the community. Participants emphasized the importance of flexible and sensible zoning regulations that can adapt to unique circumstances without being overly rigid. The redevelopment of the former GM plant and the overall development of the south side were also identified as critical locations to focus on for the code rewrite to ensure the new code can accommodate desirable developments.

Administrative Process

Development processes and procedures were a topic of significant discussion among various focus group participants. There was a general appreciation for a noticeable trend towards flexibility and open-mindedness. Key issues include the Planned Unit Development (PUD) process and the need for a more user-friendly and efficient ordinance. Balancing strict regulations with practical discretion and an intentional pre-development process between developers and staff are viewed as essential steps toward creating a more streamlined and supportive development environment. Clarity in understanding administrative processes behind zoning and land division is desired.

Barriers to Development

Focus group participants shared a wide range of comments and concerns identifying what they felt were barriers to development. Many of these challenges exist outside of what zoning and subdivision can address such as the need for economic development policy, subsidies, and other processes that may be explored in the future. Nonetheless, these processes will be influenced by the new code. Difficult to understand review processes and zoning permit requirements were among the barriers identified in the zoning and subdivision codes. The process has often been seen as cumbersome, with delays caused by minor details and interpretations of complicated language. Simplifying complex standards that are difficult to interpret or may change in the development plan throughout the design development process is recognized as an opportunity to avoid such complications. Additional barriers cited were rigid neighborhood plans and time-consuming public input. Addressing these concerns requires more clear, concise regulations.

Development Focus

Janesville is a community with many diverse neighborhoods and districts, and the focus group participants emphasized the need to contextualize development to reflect this diversity. While there is enthusiasm for the redevelopment of key areas like downtown, the Woodman's Center and Uptown Janesville, some respondents also voiced concerns about traffic, parking, and the impact on nearby neighborhoods. There is desire for the zoning and possibly subdivision code to address and review such area-specific impacts during the review process and/or through new zoning design standards. More recreational spaces were desired across the city, which can be implemented through the allowable uses within the new zoning code. The community also expressed support for exploring regulations that would reduce entitlement cost burdens on local businesses, address master planning needs (anticipating master planning/PUD would be needed to develop the former GM site), and zoning regulations that support infill development.

Downtown

Efforts to revitalize downtown have been met with widespread approval and optimism. While there has been a clear need expressed for increased residential projects to support these efforts, challenges such as property assembly for large-scale developments and a slow residential market persist. The demand for diverse housing options, including more affordable, and more varied units, has been noted as compared to the recent emphasis on market-rate apartments. Opportunities for increased housing diversity are presented through an exploration of more flexible parking standards, allowing smaller units, and smaller lot sizes. As downtown continues to expand, a desire both for flexible and right-sized parking solutions, but also convenient, accessible and affordable parking solutions was expressed. Emphasis on non-vehicular mobility in the downtown was noted as a potential solution to de-emphasize the need for parking, while developments can also include bike parking and walkable pedestrian accommodation.

Housing Availability and Affordability

The focus groups highlighted a significant need for diverse housing options in Janesville, including single-family homes, multifamily units, and market-rate, affordable, and workforce housing for all populations. Challenges include high land costs necessitating higher density housing and a lack of available land zoned for more than 1-2 family housing throughout most of the city. There is a strong desire for housing that is walkable to amenities and supports multi-modal transportation beyond the downtown. Flexibility in zoning and planning is needed to accommodate these diverse housing needs. Developers also expressed desire for clearer guidance on preferred locations, zoning processes and definitions of workforce and affordable housing.

Multifamily Development and Density

Focus group participants expressed a desire for additional multi-family development, emphasizing the need for these projects to be well-integrated with community services and amenities. While newer developments like The Glade are seen as attractive models, there is a call for more affordable multi-family housing options beyond the downtown area. Residents are advocating for creative and flexible housing solutions, such as “missing middle” housing, that can effectively utilize space and blend seamlessly into existing neighborhoods. There is also a recognized need for higher density and infill development, to address high land costs and support a variety of housing types. Participants also expressed a desire for creating high-quality public places and ensuring that changes in density are sensitive to the character of different neighborhoods, recognizing that more density increases the importance of developing dedicated spaces for outdoor recreation and passive activity. Additionally, preference was expressed for the current zoning code to be updated to better support multi-family development by exploring various solutions.

Neighborhoods and Walkability

Focus group participants acknowledged Janesville's diverse neighborhoods, each with unique strengths and challenges. They expressed a strong desire for walkable neighborhoods. Access to quality outdoor spaces and essential amenities such as parks, trails, and neighborhood commercial retail is crucial for fostering thriving neighborhoods, particularly on the south side. While mixed-use development has faced market support concerns, it remains a viable option for creating vibrant, multi-functional neighborhoods and should be accommodated in the code. Thoughtful neighborhood design, and incorporating a mix of uses, densities, and housing types is seen as essential for meeting affordability needs and enhancing community interaction. Additionally, exploring more architectural variety was seen as potentially contributing to the overall quality and aesthetic of Janesville's neighborhoods.

Parking Requirements

The discussion around parking requirements has highlighted a strong preference for market-driven solutions over rigid mandates. Participants emphasized the need for flexible parking standards that adapt to actual needs rather than being overly prescriptive. There was a consensus that current parking requirements are often excessive, particularly for senior housing, and that a focus on walkability and pedestrian-friendly designs should be prioritized. Concerns were also raised about the financial and spatial impacts of minimum parking requirements, suggesting a more geographically varied approach with shared parking options for mixed-use developments. Overall, the sentiment leans towards reducing unnecessary parking mandates and allowing the market to dictate the appropriate standards. Some concerns were expressed around reducing parking minimums, noting that effective alternatives to driving need to be substituted when parking is reduced.

Planned versus By-Right Development

Most focus group respondents preferred to see more development allowed by right rather than by conditional use or PUD. This would simplify the process significantly and encourage more development consistent with the Comprehensive Plan. However, PUD processes are likely still necessary for infill sites with substantial complexity.

Signs

Signs generated limited discussion among stakeholders, especially outside of sign company representatives, but nonetheless highlighted several key issues. Concerns have been raised about the restrictive nature of the code, which some believe hinders business operations. The Board of Appeals frequently encounters requests for variances due to inconsistent language and substantial requirements. Strict regulations on Electronic Message Centers further complicate their use. Advocates argue that attractive, creative, innovative, and aesthetic sign designs should be encouraged for their added value. However, concerns about sign heights, landscaping requirements that may obscure signs, and stringent distance requirements for off-premise signs were also expressed. Additionally, the inclusion of the area below the sign in square footage calculations has been questioned. Despite these challenges, most exterior design standards are generally in line with industry standards and those of Janesville's peer communities.

Smaller Lots and/or Tiny Homes and ADU's

The focus groups discussion around housing trends indicated a growing interest in smaller lots, tiny/smaller homes, and accessory dwelling units (ADUs). There is general support for offering these options, but there is fear of the perception of mandating them. Opinions are mixed on reducing dimensional standards for front and rear yards, reflecting concerns about parking in driveways and spaces for neighborhood interaction. However, there is a notable interest in smaller, low-maintenance homes for older adults and a desire for more flexible housing types without the need for Planned Unit

Developments (PUDs). Developers are seeking greater flexibility to offer options for smaller lots and homes with reduced setbacks to address affordability and supply challenges.

Subdivision and Site Design Standards

The City's current subdivision and site development standards are generally in line with its peer communities but should be reviewed with a focus on balancing the needs of diverse neighborhoods and market demands. While the existing ordinance promotes larger lots, there is a growing call for areas that support infill development with smaller lots. Subdivision standards are generally seen as reasonable, but there is a desire to revisit requiring neighborhood plans and review overall design standards to better reflect the unique character of each area.