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Carrboro takes step toward IFC kitchen

Debate sparks tension, threats of boycott

Katie Jansen 6 min ago

CARRBORO -- After more than two hours of public comment from more than 40 speakers, the Carrboro Board of Aldermen unanimously approved a change to town law that could eventually allow the Inter-Faith Council for Social Service to open a dining facility that provides free meals at 110 W. Main St.

Several Aldermen, as well as several members of the public who commented, emphasized that the change, which came in the form of a text amendment to the town's Land Use Ordinance, didn't approve the proposal — it simply opened the door for an application to be submitted.

"We're asking you whether or not we can apply," said attorney LeAnn Brown, who is representing IFC, at the opening of the public comment period. "And we're asking you to please let us apply."



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At the end of the public hearing, Alderwoman Bethany Chaney expressed similar sentiments.

"We can't have an authentic conversation about hunger in our community if we do not allow this use to exist," she said. "I'm ready to vote."

Alderman Damon Seils agreed, saying that any further delay in action would send a negative message to the community, especially those who rely on social services. He made the motion both to pass a statement that said the text amendment was consistent with the town's Carrboro Vision 2020 and to pass the text amendment.

Alderwoman Jacquie Gist expressed hesitation about the vote, saying that it wasn't customary for the board to make decisions the same night after a lengthy public hearing. She also said that she felt the Aldermen needed to hear the opinions of more community members who would be affected by the potential kitchen.

At that point, an audience member interrupted her.

"There was no controversy present," he said. "If you can't show up, you can't talk."

Alderwoman Gist suggested that many of the text amendment's opponents didn't show up to speak because of backlash from the community. She said she had heard people proposing to boycott the businesses that were concerned about the ramifications of the kitchen.

Gist admonished those who had proposed boycotts, saying that such an idea conflicted with Carrboro's values and tight-knit community.

"(Business owners') livelihoods have been threatened, and I think that's really, really sad," she said.

But Gist did vote to approve the text amendment, saying that it was "an act of faith" and that she hoped IFC would continue to consider other locations for the kitchen.

Although many supporters of the text amendment spoke before the vote, some of the speakers did oppose the change, such as semi-retired social worker and Carrboro resident Emily Gordon.

She said that although she supported food services for the hungry, she worried about what would happen when there wasn't shelter space to keep up with the needs of the homeless.

"Once people are directed over here, the idea is they'll get on the bus and they'll go back to — where? Nowhere, because they have nowhere to go," she said.

Grace Holton, who owns property on the 100 block of West Main Street, said she, too, was against the text amendment. She said that social services is a community-wide responsibility and that Orange County and Chapel Hill also ought to be involved in the conversation.

IFC's kitchen is currently located in Chapel Hill on West Rosemary Street, but for more than 10 years, IFC staff has expressed interest in consolidating the kitchen with its other services, such as the food pantry located at 110 West Main.

Meg Holton, who, along with Grace Holton, owns property nearby, said downtown Carrboro already has plenty of social services, like IFC's food pantry, TABLE and Club Nova.

"These are not problems that can be solved quickly or by concentrating all the problems, programs and people on a quarter-acre lot," she said.

But many speakers endorsed the text amendment, saying that feeding the hungry was in line with Carrboro's progressive and inclusive values.

"There comes a time when basic human needs should be put before the bottom line and image," said Barbara Foushee.

She added that placing the kitchen at a location that was less easily accessible would be discriminatory.

Other speakers agreed.

"I would digest my food a lot better knowing that we provide the opportunity for hungry people to eat a meal among us," said Rich Bell, a Carrboro resident.

He added that this debate wasn't about the building's design or about how to manage the property or about other concerns brought up during the meeting. It was about one simple question — whether hungry people should be able to be served downtown.

Carrboro resident Justin Jacobs said he was "disgusted" that businesses would stand in the way of the text amendment.

"Because I don't take my moral and ethical imperatives from government officials," he said, "I encourage all of you to participate in a boycott."

But Keith Taylor, president of IFC's board of directors, disagreed.

"We're all in this community together, and we all need to live in harmony, and I would certainly recommend that you continue to frequent all the businesses in downtown Carrboro," he said.

Matt Neal, owner of Neal's Deli, said that just because some business owners had concerns didn't mean they were trying to kick IFC and hungry people out of town.

"For those of you out there — and I know you're out there — who want to boycott business in downtown Carrboro, you're barking up the wrong tree," he said. "We've been supporting the IFC for years. We will continue to do so."



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