

Landlord has Words for Town in Boarding House Plan

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Local businessman Steve Corbin says he doesn't understand why the town is singling out his boarding house on East Piedmont Street. He maintains the five-bedroom property is well kept and provides an essential need: affordable housing.

Corbin purchased the cream-colored house at 302 E. Piedmont about a year ago at a foreclosure auction, spending "a lot of money" to get it to its current condition. He now rents it to five boarders, who share a kitchen.

"There is a great need for this type of housing," Corbin told the Star-Exponent Thursday. "My boarders need a place with heat and air-conditioning and some place to cook; \$50 to \$100 a week is all they can afford."

But with the town planning commission and planning staff looking to enact a new boarding house ordinance that would require fire-rated walls and other expensive upgrades, the affordable housing option would no longer be feasible, said Corbin, a Culpeper resident who owns multiple residential and commercial properties in the town and county.

At its meeting earlier this week, the planning commission directed town staff to draft an ordinance permitting new boarding houses only in commercial zones and subject to a conditional use permit, allowing the town to conduct on-site inspections. In addition, the proposed ordinance, if adopted by Culpeper Town Council, would require the owner to live on the premises.

A town report presented to the planning commission Tuesday identified Corbin's property and another at 401 E. Piedmont St. as two known boarding houses in town, though he said he was never contacted by the town about it.

The intent of the proposed ordinance is to curtail excessive occupancy and building neglect, although that does not appear to be the case — at least from the outside — with Corbin's Piedmont Street boarding house.

Currently, boarding houses operate in town without restriction and are permitted "by right" in dense residential areas as well as commercial and industrial zones.

Although the proposed ordinance would not apply to Corbin's property, as it would be grandfathered in, he doesn't think the town should be discouraging investments in this type of housing, especially in the current economy.

"The town should be happy someone is buying these distressed properties," he said.

Corbin said he once ran two other boarding houses on Sperryville Pike, but he tore them down to build the Culpeper Car Wash.

Whatever comes of the ongoing boarding house discussion — the proposed ordinance goes back before planners at its August meeting — Corbin said he's willing to work with the town to find resolution.

“Just tell me what the problem is,” he said.

The problem, apparently, is rundown single-family homes in town being operated as flop houses with boarders basically living on top of each other.

Neighbors, understandably, object to such conditions as their own property values decrease.

The town has yet to officially identify any such place, but one East Street resident told the Star-Exponent about a house in his neighborhood where the first floor basically consisted of mattresses on the floor, all crammed together.

Told about this, Corbin suggested the town convene a forum of landlords to talk about the issue and develop “a compromise for affordable housing” options.

As for his boarding house, Corbin said he keeps it neat.

“I understand some landlords may have a rough clientele, but as long as my boarders pay their rent and are orderly, I have no problem,” he said.

Corbin said he often works with the Department of Social Services, the community services board and local churches in facilitating affordable housing options for local residents.