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City commission updates codes

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Home construction and improvement will look a little different in Liberal, thanks to several ordinances approved by Liberal City Commissioners at their Tuesday meeting. The act of picking up hammer and nails to build a fence, renovate a kitchen or construct a new shed won't change, but the process leading up to the job will.

In three unanimous votes, commissioners approved ordinances that will directly affect property owners.

The first, number 4421, adopted a neighborhood revitalization plan that aims to encourage improvements to decrepit areas by offering property owners a tax break on upgrades.

The second, a first reading of ordinance 4423, sought to set up a seven-person building safety board of appeals.



The third, 4424, also a first reading, established a brand-new set of codes for building, building regulation and code enforcement in Liberal.

Two of the ordinances affect property owners from the earliest stages of a project. To qualify for special tax rebates offered through the neighborhood revitalization plan, property owners must fill out an application and take care to embark on projects that meet the program's requirements.

"It's really geared toward revitalizing decrepit neighborhoods," said housing and community development director Karen LaFreniere, "toward people fixing up their homes or properties in those neighborhoods."

The program is flexible and allows for more neighborhoods to be added to the map boundaries upon request, said city manager Mark Hall.

In comments presented during the public hearing on Ordinance 4421, citizen and real estate developer John Smith asked the commissioners to do just that. The empty-lot area between 11th and 15th Streets, behind Village Plaza and running to Calvert Ave. on the east, "has been platted and zoned for almost 40 years ... and is illustrative of some of the problems that stunt Liberal's growth," he said. "I would ask you to give consideration to amending the map area."

At this time, the revitalization plan does not address the area Smith referred to. LaFreniere explained to the commissioners that the definition of a decrepit neighborhood is not fixed; an area may not be run-down, though an individual property is, and vice-versa. For now, the revitalization project focuses on existing properties, not empty lots.

Even so, vice-mayor Janet Willimon thanked Smith for his input. Citizens coming to the board to express their ideas "is how we move forward," she said.

Meanwhile, the commissioners approved the first reading of a massive code overhaul prepared

by director of building services and code enforcement Kory Krause — with help from city clerk Debbie Giskie. Krause joked that he'd dumped nearly 200 pages of raw building code data on Giskie, who painstakingly sorted, typed and transformed the information into a 35-page document.

The ordinance establishes a comprehensive set of codes for the City of Liberal, and includes standards from professional oversight associations — fire resistance, plumbing, electrical work, fuel gas, swimming pool and spa maintenances and other national and international groups. Krause said the code update was long overdue.

“In the past, Liberal has adopted codes individually, and it's really outdated, especially with all the new technology,” he said.

Some codes currently in use date back to 1997, while other codes follow standards set in 2003 or 2006. Construction companies are not always sure which set of rules to follow, noted commissioner Ron Warren, a builder by trade.

Not only does the new set of codes establish consistency in terms of professional standards in many different trades, it puts Liberal on a level playing field with other cities in the area.

“It's consistent with what they have in Dodge City and Garden City,” Krause said.

The new code book allows contractors to design and bid across the board rather than having to work by a set of rules unique to Liberal. The standardized code should spark new activity in Liberal's housing market, Krause noted, with agreement from Hall.

“That's what this board is trying to generate,” Krause said.

The new set of codes comes with an updated fee schedule, including fines for property owners and construction contractors who don't follow the city's procedure for obtaining permits, using

licensed professionals, and completing projects within the approved time frame.

“It’s totally different than the fee schedule we have right now, which we haven’t changed for years,” Krause said. The current system has required each separate contractor to come to City Hall to pay for permits. Now, general contractors can take care of the entire project at once.

“It will be a lot easier,” he said.

Property owners, too, are expected to pay fees for construction, whether the project is small — like a new fence in the yard — or more complicated, like adding a new bathroom to a house. Fines apply to projects that are started without proper permitting, or which are performed by nonlicensed workers.

Giskie told the commission that once the new set of codes is adopted, the fee schedule will be posted online.

With so many changes to housing construction and improvement policies, Krause expects people to have questions. He’s hoping that the soon-to-be-established building safety board of appeals will address issues as they arise.

“I had three contractors in my office this morning, asking questions,” he said. “The board of appeals will help us get information from the contractors, and it will help them, too.”

Citizens who have opinions about the board of appeals should contact Krause or their city commissioners, as the board’s establishment will appear on the agenda for a second reading at a future meeting.

See tomorrow’s Leader & Times for a closer look at the proposal for a Building Safety Board of Appeals.

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