3-21-1980

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Available at: https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol6/iss3/3

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Dual Occupancy in Huntsville

Dual occupancy is now permitted in the central business district of Huntsville as a special exception. An amendment to the Zoning Ordinance was approved by the City Council in November that allows the owner of a downtown building to renovate the upper floors for residential use. Previously the Zoning Ordinance prohibited combining commercial and residential uses in the same structure when the building's primary use was office or other non-residential.

This change makes available an alternative for redevelopment of downtown buildings. Today, most upper floors are vacant because businesses apparently prefer to locate on the street level. Consequently the owner of the building is receiving only a partial return on his property. It is true that commercial uses would provide a better financial return than residential, but when there is no commercial demand for this space, conversion to residential use might be better than no return at all.

Another consideration is that the downtown currently empties at five o'clock each evening leaving the area deserted. If apartments were available there, a second group of people—residents—would come into the area at night. A resident population, in time, could create a neighborhood market for small specialty shops and restaurants, especially when combined with the already stabilized populations of Old Town and Twickenham. Furthermore, the constantly escalating cost of gasoline will, before long, make living near work a serious consideration for many people, while the demand for apartments continues to increase because of the growth of one and two person families. While downtown apartments do not appeal to everyone, there are many who would be attracted to such an environment. Presumably they would be predominantly single people, young couples without children, and the retired. This does not mean a return to the days when the downtown had shabby apartments and similar tenants: this problem can be avoided by developing quality apartments offered for standard rents. Because this residential option is available as a special exception to the zoning, the plans for such projects must be reviewed by the Board of Zoning Adjustment prior to approval to determine that the structure meets all building and safety codes of the city.

For Huntsville's downtown to be truly revitalized, it must develop a variety of attractions and functions. If a resident population can be added to the government and professional workers, and the tourist potential of the Space Center and Civic Center can be tapped by the Transportation Museum and Constitution Hall Park, then the downtown will develop a life of its own that can support shops, restaurants, and entertainment facilities. The simple truth is—people go where people are.