

An Open Letter on Keep Worthington Beautiful By Councilman Doug Smith

This November, Worthington residents will vote on the Keep Worthington Beautiful (KWB) charter amendment. The KWB committee gathered hundreds of citizen signatures to place the amendment on the ballot.

Today, I would like to publicly support the Keep Worthington Beautiful initiative because it will protect Worthington's character and family-friendly atmosphere. After researching the issue extensively, I can say that the KWB initiative is a valid way to give residents more rights when it comes to development and zoning changes that impact their neighborhoods. Below is information that I collected during my research.

Amendment function

The KWB amendment is not a new function in the city charter. It simply extends the amount of time residents have to file an initiative petition from 20 days to 60 days. In light of some future development projects that greatly impact the city, having the extra time could be crucial to preventing an undesired development. The amendment gives the residents a practical mechanism for telling city leaders that they do not wish to have specific zoning changes approved (e.g., UMCH property).

Current zoning: Why should residents care?

The Worthington Zoning Map was created in 1971. I encourage residents to view the zoning map at Worthington.org to view the city's types of zoning. Properties with an existing zoning code can currently be redeveloped by any owner at any time as long as there are no zoning changes required and the property owner works through the existing municipal planning process.

Many Worthington residents are not affected directly by zoning changes because the most desirable properties for future development include parcels along High Street (including UMCH), Wilson Bridge Road, Huntley Road, and Proprietors Road. However, there are additional parcels of land that may be of interest to developers. Any land along 161 would be desirable as well as parcels on Park Boulevard, Hartford and Morning Streets near the library, Worthington-Galena Road, Plesenton Drive, Linworth Road, Park Overlook, and Indianola Avenue. I have been told by developers that these areas are considered desirable for future development.

Currently, most parcels on these streets are zoned residential. However, if a developer wanted to have a parcel rezoned for a high-density residence or an office building, they could immediately begin moving forward with plans following the 20-day waiting period. The KWB amendment would give neighbors and residents 60 days to stop a development.

Why would one oppose the KWB initiative?

The opponents of the KWB initiative have offered three reasons why KWB is not worthy of support:

1. It will hurt development.
2. It will prohibit Council from doing its job in zoning matters.
3. All development is good, even if it impacts the community character.

Will the KWB amendment hurt economic development?

The opposition will say that that the KWB amendment will deter development and progress in Worthington. The fact is that it will not impact development negatively. The inherent impact will necessarily prompt developers to talk to the community and residents prior to requesting a zoning change. If the developer feels that the community would not support their proposed use, then they can revise the proposal. The KWB amendment will foster healthy and responsible development in Worthington.

To this point, it is important to know how I came to this conclusion. Since 2001, there have been 16 developers requesting zoning changes that could have been impacted by a KWB amendment. I contacted each of these 16 developers (totaling 28 land parcels) and was able to talk to 10 developers directly. All 10 said there would have been no difference in the outcome of the development if they were required to wait 60 days instead of 20 days. Most of them said it would have prompted them to communicate more with the community to make sure the project was worthwhile before requesting the change. Additionally, most of the developers said that the city's Architecture Review process is the most burdensome part about working with Worthington, but they all understood why the process was in place and they were willing to work through the process for the right projects.

What about the six developers that I was unable to contact directly? One property is a residential property that was annexed into Worthington and was required to have a zoning change. Three of the properties requested re-zoning for changes to building-use intent. One is J Liu restaurant. One is a potential development on East Wilson Bridge Road including several parcels of land. It has been in planning for years. I submit that all the projects requesting zoning changes were worthwhile projects whose developers would have waited the additional 40 days to develop in Worthington.

Currently, Worthington offers a 20-day waiting period while all other municipalities in central Ohio offer a 30-day waiting period. There is no evidence whatsoever that developers are choosing Worthington over other municipalities merely because the time they must wait after the zoning change. By the same logic, if there is no impact on development with a shorter waiting period, why would there be impact on development with a longer waiting period? It will positively impact the residents by giving them more time to voice concerns, if needed.

Does the language prohibit Council from doing its job?

The KWB language about “no passage by emergency” will not prohibit Council from doing its job effectively. According to city staff, the city law director cannot conceive of a situation where a rezoning ordinance should be considered an emergency. The intent of the KWB language was to make sure that Council could not go against the wishes of the community by passing a zoning change by emergency. The intent and the language are both good.

Is all development good?

The first and second points are not really substantiated claims. The third point is a matter of opinion. Do you prefer keeping up with development trends or preserving Worthington’s character?

I would recommend preserving Worthington’s character.

KWB opponents will site sources like the Arthur Nelson study and the Richard Fry study, stating that development must cater to young professionals and millennials because they are the growing population in central Ohio. Both studies comprehensively assess the millennial generation housing and development trends. KWB opponents generally accept the idea that we need more development to attract millennials because that is the current trend.

In contrast, preserving Worthington’s character is more valuable than following trends. Worthington’s character is unique because the city leaders in generations preceding us did not “buy in” to trends.

While development can be beneficial to a city like Worthington, any potential development must be carefully intertwined with the existing community. City representatives and developers must be respectful and considerate of community needs and desires. Development must not “barge in” and step on Worthington values. The community made that clear during the 2012 Giant Eagle proposal and the Lifestyle Communities proposal earlier this year.

I believe people live in Worthington because of the family-friendly environment, the historic character, and the quality of life we enjoy due to good city services and schools. Businesses and developers recognize the value that Worthington offers as a unique place with quality people. The KWB initiative keeps Worthington unique; it keeps Worthington beautiful.

I encourage you to join me in supporting the Keep Worthington Beautiful Initiative by voting “yes” this November.

Respectfully,
Doug Smith
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