

Northport to vote on group home rules

Zoning amendment would add restrictions

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Published: Monday, October 17, 2011 at 3:30 a.m.

There could be a crowd at the Northport City Council meeting tonight as members take up new rules about group homes.

The council is expected to vote on an amendment to city zoning laws that would add a layer of rules for group homes, often single-family residences modified to allow people with mental disabilities or mental illness to be integrated into the community while still receiving professional care. Notably, the proposed rules would limit group homes from being within a mile of each.

"Everybody should have a chance to live the American dream," said Jeff Ridgeway, president of People First of Alabama, an advocacy group for people with mental disabilities.

Ridgeway, who lives in Mobile, said several members of the organization, which is run by people with disabilities, plan to attend the meeting at 6 p.m. at City Hall to speak out against the proposed changes.

"How do they think they'll get away with it?" Ridgeway asked. "This should be a slap in the face of every American alive."

Also, University of Alabama students plan to protest the proposed changes outside City Hall this afternoon.

"It's a civil and social injustice to pass judgment on a group of people just because of a disability," said B.J. Sewell, a senior from Tuscaloosa studies social work.

Jessica Peoples, also studying social work, says she believes there is misunderstanding by the City Council and others of the people who live in group homes. Those who live in the homes are not a threat, she said.

"They are overlooking the fact that these are individuals with rights," said Peoples, who is from Aliceville.

City Council President William Tunnell said anyone can speak to the council before the vote.

The only current city regulation regarding group homes is the requirement that the home's operator obtain a business license, but the homes are regulated by the state and are also subject to federal laws.

The city's amendment would add a section on group homes to the zoning ordinance. The section would have six parts that would:

- Require group home operators to present their state license when applying for a business license.

- Mandate that no more than three unrelated people can live in the home, while



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allowing caretakers who don't live there.

-Require submission of a parking plan to ensure vehicles are not regularly parked in the street.

-Require that group homes be at least one mile away from one another.

-Require property owners to submit a notarized letter approving the use of the residence as a group home, if the operator is not the property owner.

-Allow operators or owners to apply for waivers, modifications or exceptions to the standards through the Planning Commission.

In general, the federal Fair Housing Act prohibits municipalities from enacting zoning laws that discriminate against individuals based on race, color, religion, sex, nationality, family situation or disability.

Northport leaders have said the proposed zoning laws are in line with federal laws, and are needed to protect property values of city residents.

The Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program lodged a complaint of housing discrimination with the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development over the rules earlier this month. ADAP, based in Tuscaloosa, is part of a nationwide federally mandated protection and advocacy system.

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