

**Altoona Board of Adjustment Hearing – November 14, 2017 – 6:30 PM
Altoona City Hall**

Members Present: Hall, Rullman, Simon, Morris

Members Absent: Downs

Staff: John Shaw, Chad Quick, Sydney McCabe, Greg Stallman

Guests: Matthew Sheirer, Christina Price, Kathy Bowen, Norm Vos, Mark Jones, Donna Lander

Chairman Rullman called the hearing to order at 6:28 p.m.

1. Consider a request for a conditional use permit from Alan and Donna Lander for their property at 914 1st Street East. They are seeking a permit to operate a Bed and Breakfast (short term residential rental) business in their home.

Donna Lander, 914 1st St E, said that she wanted to do an Airbnb and was not aware of any rules. Lander said she and her husband are retired and they started using Airbnb to meet people. She said Airbnb has been working well; they have been renting using the website since August. Lander said they rent their walk out basement, which includes a den, kitchenette, and bedroom.

Rullman asked how many guests the Landers have had.

Lander said 22 guests. She said they have had one guest staying Monday through Thursday since September, while he is commuting to work. He will be staying with them regularly through the spring.

Morris asked if they have had the housing inspection.

Lander said yes.

Rullman asked about the guest that has been staying there regularly.

Shaw said since it is not the same guest full time, it qualifies as a short term rental and is not considered multi-family.

Rullman asked how Lander controls the guests arriving and if she has a separate lock on the door.

Lander said she controls the door, and she never leaves the house when guests are present.

Hall asked if there were any neighbor complaints.

Mark Jones, 812 1st St E, said he is a neighbor and he has no problem with it.

Lander said she should have asked more neighbors but there have been no complaints. She said that Airbnb is very safe, and guests have to provide a name, picture, and a credit card number.

Rullman stated that Lander is just renting out one bedroom, so she cannot have more than two people.

Lander said she is not interested in having more than 1 or 2 people.

Rullman said parking is not a problem in that area.

Lander said they have plenty of room for parking.

Morris said that the Board saw another short term residential rental last month, so they are more familiar with the process now.

Lander said she only advertises on the Airbnb website.

Hall asked if Lander has a sign in her yard.

Lander said she does not have a sign.

Simon asked about the guest who is there regularly, and if he has to sign a new contract each time.

Lander said he books through Airbnb each time.

Rullman said the Board should review the Conditional Use Permit in one year.

Lander asked if she needs to come back in a year.

Rullman said yes, it needs to be reviewed in a year.

Morris motioned to approve the Conditional Use Permit with the following stipulations:

1) There are only two guests maximum per stay. 2) The homeowners must be on site for the duration of the renters' stay. 3) All parking must be on the property. 4) The Conditional Use Permit is brought back in front of the Board in one year for review. Simon seconded. Yes – Hall, Rullman, Simon, Morris. No – None. Motion approved with stipulations.

2. Consider a request for variance from Strollo Development – Iowa LLC (dba RV One Superstores, Inc.) for their property at 1400 Northridge Circle. They are seeking variance to exceed the overall sign area limit for a property in the M-1 zoning district. The Sign Ordinance is Chapter 159 of the City Code.

Rullman stated that this item needs to be tabled until the next meeting.

Morris motioned to table. Simon seconded. Yes – Hall, Rullman, Simon, Morris. No – None. Motion tabled.

3. Consider a request for variance from Strollo Development – Iowa LLC (dba RV One Superstores, Inc.) for their property at 1400 Northridge Circle. They are seeking variance to have a changeable copy sign on an Interstate sign. The Sign Ordinance is Chapter 159 of the City Code.

Christina Price, representing Jones Sign Company, and Matthew Sheirer, store manager of Des Moines RV. Price asked if the Board was just addressing the changeable copy in this item.

Shaw said they are different sections of the Code, but the Board can discuss the overall sign and then discuss the individual items separately.

Price said after reviewing the report and the site, they have decided to remove the “V” shape, so that removes items 4 and 5.

Shaw said for the record, Strollo Development is dropping requests 4 and 5.

Price confirmed they are dropping requests 4 and 5.

Price said RV One is an independent dealer, so they sell multiple lines of RVs. She spoke of the need to keep the message current, and that the design of the sign matches the building

Matthew Sheirer said he is very excited to be in the community of Altoona. He said the location of the new RV One is very desirable, especially when meeting people that are traveling cross country in an RV. Sheirer said it is difficult to turn around and come back while driving an RV. He said potential customers may pass by and not return. Sheirer said customers that need assistance may pass by and not be able to exit the interstate in time.

Price said the dealership does unscheduled service, which is why the sign is important.

Rullman said the lot is close to the interstate, so it is easy to see. There is nothing blocking the view of the dealership.

Price said the easement widens as you get closer to the exit, so the plan is to put the sign in the back corner.

Rullman stated that there is no business in front of them, so the dealership is easy to see.

Sheirer said it is difficult to make lane changes while driving large equipment.

Hall asked about adding signs on 80 or 35.

Sheirer said directional signs are expensive and have a static message. He said the brands they carry change often, so static billboards will not work. Sheirer stated the facility is built to handle a large amount of service work.

Morris asked how often the message can change on the sign.

Price said they follow the 8 second rule.

Morris asked how many changes to the sign per day.

Shaw said that the message can change every 8 seconds.

Simon said the issue is that the property is not zoned to allow that.

Shaw agreed that the interstate sign is not intended for that.

Price said in addition to changing every 8 seconds, the sign also automatically dims at night.

Morris asked if the main hardship was that people would have to turn around in their RVs while driving.

Sheirer agreed that the main hardship was people not being able to turn around if they pass the exit.

Morris said that people have GPS on their phone and utilize that more than signs.

Sheirer agreed, but said that technology is surpassing individual abilities. He stated that the advertising tools that would help people find the dealership are very expensive.

Morris asked if people were coming to the dealership for repairs.

Sheirer said not necessarily. He said the Altoona facility is designed to do more repairs than a typical dealership. Sheirer said some customers do make appointments, but some also come to the dealership for unscheduled service.

Hall asked what kind of a background the sign has.

Price said it depends on the message, but they recommend a black background. Price said she does not look down at her phone when driving.

Morris agreed that you should not look at your phone while driving, but a passenger can look up information or you can pull over.

Sheirer said the GPS in an RV is not easily accessible to the passenger, and destinations are not easily changeable.

Rullman said if you have an issue while traveling, you should be able to pull off the road and look for a service center.

Sheirer said he wants to help customers that have smaller issues that may try to make it, and not those broken down. He said he is trying to reach customers that may be passing through and not know that the dealership sells certain brands.

Simon asked if Sheirer had spoken with brands the dealership carries about better marketing to customers.

Sheirer said the brands do advertise, but the US is a large area to market. Manufacturers do not advertise every dealership. Sheirer said that also does not help people that have a service issue.

Rullman asked about service signs for the State of Iowa.

Sheirer said that the company has interchangeable signs in Albany, New York and it has been well received.

Rullman said he was speaking about free standing blue signs through the State that advertise service centers.

Sheirer said he was unsure if those were available to them.

Price said the company would have to check with the Iowa DOT.

Rullman said drivers would be looking for those signs for a service center. He asked if the service center would be open 24 hours.

Sheirer said that there are two shifts scheduled, one day shift and one night shift. Sheirer said he is not sure if it will be open 24 hours.

Rullman said he has friends that live in an RV and they are able to look on their phone to find service centers.

Sheirer said RVs have specific mechanical issues that only an RV center can address. He said passengers are co-pilots and not navigators.

Price said that this would also attract new people to the area and support local businesses.

Morris asked if the sign would advertise the types of RVs that the dealership services.

Sheirer said that RV One services all RVs, but is sometimes limited by warranties. He said that the dealership is adding new brands frequently.

Morris asked what the sign would say.

Sheirer said the sign would list multiple brands.

Morris commented that only two messages would be seen while driving.

Sheirer said that if a vehicle is traveling from the west, they would not see an RV until they have passed the exit.

Morris said that we want people to come to Altoona, but we have rules, and there has to be a hardship.

Sheirer said that Ryder Used Truck has a sign like they want.

Shaw said that RV One is allowed to have an interstate sign, just not the reader board.

Rullman said that the Board was not denying RV One a sign.

Shaw said businesses are allowed interstate high rise signs. He said interstate signs are intended for businesses providing lodging, food, gas, and vehicle services, which is why RV One is permitted to have one. No one is allowed a reader board. Shaw said RV One will be able to get their interstate high rise sign.

Price said the hardship is that RV One cannot convey that they do service work without the reader board.

Rullman said the notes say the interstate sign is permissible if the message board is removed/changed to a standard sign, and the “V” shape is removed, so that RV One would meet the maximum 300 square feet.

Morris asked if the sign lights up.

Price said yes, the sign lights up. She said the lettering on the sign lights up, so it is aesthetically pleasing.

Morris asked if the only issue was the reader board.

Price said yes.

Simon asked if RV One could add a message on the sign that advertises a service center.

Sheirer said that a permanent message on the sign would not help, as RV service can be out a month. He said that the ability to take an immediate service call is unusual.

Rullman talked about the Des Moines RV dealership sign in Des Moines. He said he did not see service center advertised on that sign.

Sheirer said there is no service at all at that facility. He spoke about not knowing specific brands carried at that facility due to the lack of brands on the sign.

Rullman said he can see the vehicles in the lot.

Sheirer said only 25% of equipment is visible on that lot. He said every customer they miss is a hardship for his employees.

Simon asked how often the inventory on the website is updated.

Sheirer said every single day, but there is so much of it to sort through. He said each brand could have 100 different floor plan options. He stated the customer that is on the website is not going to need the changeable copy sign.

Morris said if a customer passed RV One and really needed something, they would go to the next exit and come back.

Sheirer said that no one needs an RV. He said the biggest portion of his business is sales, and a customer may pass by and never come back.

Simon said shopping for an RV is not a quick decision. She said individuals have done their research before buying an RV. They will look through the website to find out different features, and the sign is not a key driving factor in sales.

Sheirer said the company just had a show at Merle Hay Mall and 50% of sales were customers that had not previously thought about owning an RV.

Simon said that she does not believe that an electronic sign is a key factor in buying an RV.

Sheirer agreed that it may not be the deciding factor.

Rullman asked how RV One sells RVs at Merle Hay Mall without a changeable message sign.

Sheirer said they rent the changeable message sign on Merle Hay. He said they use the digital sign to drive traffic.

Rullman said he understands what they want, but he does not see a hardship. RV One bought the lot, and it is very visible. He said there is no reason why the sign cannot meet the ordinance.

Sheirer said he wants to do right by the City, and will find a way if the Board does not approve it. He said if they do not get the sign, it may limit traffic, which will limit the amount of people that he is able to employ and brands he can carry.

Price said in other communities nationally, it is common to see the changeable message signs off the interstate.

Simon said that zoning prohibits it.

Rullman said he thinks people may pull off the road if they see the RV One, whether there is a reader board on the sign or not.

Price asked if they are able to use the additional square footage for a sign if the message center is not allowed.

Shaw said yes, RV One could list brands on the sign. He said that the building is very visible from the interstate.

Morris motioned to deny. Simon seconded. Yes –Rullman, Simon, Morris. No – Hall. Motion denied.

4. Consider a request for variance from Strollo Development – Iowa LLC (dba RV One Superstores, Inc.) for their property at 1400 Northridge Circle. They are seeking variance to exceed the sign area of an Interstate sign. The Sign Ordinance is Chapter 159 of the City Code.

Request withdrawn.

5. Consider a request for variance from Strollo Development – Iowa LLC (dba RV One Superstores, Inc.) for their property at 1400 Northridge Circle. They are seeking variance to have an Interstate sign that is not perpendicular to the Interstate. The Sign Ordinance is Chapter 159 of the City Code.

Request withdrawn.

6. Minutes of the October 3, 2017 meeting.

Simon motioned to approve. Rullman Seconded. Yes – Hall, Rullman, Simon, Morris. No – None. Motion approved.

7. Next meeting: December 5, 2017.

8. Determine date for January 2018 meeting. To be determined.

Hearing adjourned at 7:43 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Sydney McCabe
Community Development Office Assistant