Legislature Curtails Municipal Conditional Use Permit Authority

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The Wisconsin legislature enacted major changes to local zoning authority laws in 2017 that were urged and promoted by developers but described by its legislative supporters as a "homeowners" bill of rights. Nonetheless, the laws passed and the governor signed them. Significantly, the most important change to municipal land use powers included in the legislation, 2017 Wisconsin Act 67, impacts the conditional use permit ("CUP") authority of all local governments, including cities and villages.

Conditional Use Background

Zoning is a regulatory system designed to proactively improve the quality of land use patterns in communities and supplant the inefficient, expensive, and reactive nuisance litigation morass of the 19th century. These goals are typically accomplished by grouping compatible land use activities into zoning districts, which diminishes the negative impacts from incompatible uses.

Within the districts, certain land uses are deemed unlikely to adversely affect other uses in the district and are permitted without review. Other land use activities are only allowed as conditional uses in zoning districts even though they may be beneficial because they carry a high risk of negative external impacts on adjoining properties, neighborhoods or the whole community. These less compatible and less desirable land uses are commonly allowed only after individualized review by a zoning authority and subject to conditions designed to decrease the potential adverse impacts.

The traditional CUP system of the last 75-plus years provided cities and villages with critical flexibility to accommodate risky land uses but protect the property values and investments of adjoining property owners, neighborhoods, and the whole community. The legislative changes to city and village CUP authority attacks that balance of interests by making the CUP decision process rigid and less able to protect other property owners and communities from the negative impacts of land uses traditionally categorized as conditional uses. A CUP system is now a much less desirable land use planning and regulation tool that cities and villages might reasonably abandon altogether.

CUP Authority Changes

The Municipality published an article exploring the scope of CUP authority in 2008. See Zoning 495. Much of that article is still relevant and important to a full understanding of CUP authority in Wisconsin. However, the 2017 CUP law changes, a reaction to the Wisconsin Supreme Court's 2017 decision in *AllEnergy v. Trempealeau County*, 2017 WI 52, 375 Wis. 2d 329, 895 N.W.2d 368, substantially altered CUP authority in several critical areas.

First, the law amends the zoning enabling statute to specify that any CUP "condition imposed must be related to the purpose of the ordinance and be based on substantial evidence." Wis. Stat. §62.23(7)(de)2.a. It also mandates that CUP requirements and conditions "must be reasonable and, to the extent practicable, measurable …." Wis. Stat. §62.23(7)(de)2.b. These new obligations are problematic.

Prior to the change, general non-specific CUP requirements in zoning ordinances were reasonable and, thus legally permissible. Now, they must be based on substantial evidence and, where practicable, they must be measurable to be reasonable.

One challenge will be creating reasonable CUP requirements that are meaningful. Drafting an ordinance with reasonable requirements to govern the likely as well as all possible contingencies relating to a conditional use will be a very difficult task. A meaningful requirement that is legally reasonable in one circumstance may likely be unreasonable in another. That is due to the nature of conditional uses; their impacts vary based on location, which is why they were not classified as permitted uses in the first instance.

And, what should zoning officials make of the "substantial evidence" and "measurable" requirements? Must adoption or amendment of CUP ordinances be accompanied by a record that satisfies the substantial evidence threshold? Assuming we can figure out what "to the extent practicable" also means, how measurable does a CUP requirement have to be to comply with the new law? There are no answers to these questions in the statute and, the courts, through costly litigation, will likely be the only authority that might satisfy a disgruntled developer.

Second, what qualifies as substantial evidence – the information an administrative body is allowed to rely on in reaching its decision – is now defined by statute instead of case law. "Substantial evidence means facts and information,

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other than merely personal preferences or speculation, directly pertaining to the requirements and conditions an applicant must meet to obtain a conditional use permit and that reasonable persons would accept in support of a conclusion." Wis. Stat. §62.23(7)(de)1.b.

While similar to what the substantial evidence test was, *see AllEnergy*, 2017 WI 52 at ¶ 76, it is clear that the change was enacted to try and limit the type of information a zoning authority can rely on in deciding whether to grant a CUP. It must not only be facts and information instead of personal preferences or speculation, but those facts and information must "directly pertain" to the requirements and conditions in the zoning ordinance or established by the zoning board.

It will be impossible to confine public hearing testimony from citizens to only facts and information that directly pertains to CUP requirements and conditions. Most people do not have the kind of legal training or experience to provide wholly objective testimony at an informal zoning hearing. When this happens, are members of the zoning board legally permitted to redirect the testimony of the citizen without being challenged by the applicant as impermissibly biased? That is just one impact of the substantial evidence requirement.

The language prohibiting reliance on speculation for substantial evidence is another problem area. CUPs are inherently uses with higher risks of negative impacts on other uses. But, the negative impact varies from location to location. Therefore, is evidence about decreased property values or other negative impacts associated with a similar use at a different location speculation or non-speculation about probable impacts at the proposed location?

Third, the city and village zoning enabling statute was amended to specify that "if an applicant for a conditional use permit meets or agrees to meet all of the requirements and conditions specified in the city ordinance or those imposed by the city zoning board, the city ***shall*** grant the conditional use permit." Wis. Stat. §62.23(7)(de)2.a. (emphasis added). This language embraces a minority zoning legal theory the Wisconsin Supreme Court rejected in *AllEnergy* that "where a [CUP] applicant has shown that all conditions and standards, both by ordinance and as devised by the zoning committee, have been or will be met, the applicant is entitled to the issuance of a permit." *AllEnergy*, 2017 WI 52 at ¶119.

Adding this legal principle to Wisconsin zoning law shifts the legal burden from

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a CUP applicant to the municipal governmental body responsible for making the CUP decision. The municipality must establish a permit requirement or condition by ordinance or develop conditions that are based on substantial evidence provided at the hearing. The burden shifting limits the effectiveness of the entire CUP review process and moves CUPs much closer to permitted use status than might be desirable in most circumstances.

As already noted, the pre-hearing ordinance requirements are likely to be watered down and less meaningful in order to survive a reasonableness challenge since they will apply to all proposed CUPs that have highly variable impacts based on location. This will make CUP applications much harder to deny.

Public officials do not welcome zoning litigation. It is inefficient and costly. So, even assuming that they will have a solid understanding of substantial evidence, zoning board members will be very cautious with their authority to impose CUP conditions based on substantial evidence introduced at the zoning hearing. Again, the burden shifting will make CUP applications much more difficult to deny.

Could a CUP applicant preempt the entire CUP process by simply promising full compliance when he files the CUP application? Probably not because a public hearing is mandated and the zoning board is vested with some authority to impose conditions that are based on substantial evidence after the public hearing and before granting a permit. However, as long as the CUP applicant agrees to abide by all the requirements and conditions, zoning board discretion is nullified and it must grant the CUP.

Responding to the Changes

The legislative changes did not reduce the adverse impact risks associated with conditional uses for adjoining properties, neighborhoods, or communities. The risks are still present and, absent a municipal response, are now even greater given the reduced ability to address those negative externalities. So, cities and villages should consider their options given the new legislative restrictions on their CUP authority.

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Cities and villages can start with the knowledge that they are not legally required to have conditional uses in their zoning codes. Moreover, in most cases, the legislative decision by a city council or village board to include or not include a particular land use in a zoning district is essentially immune from legal challenge. The legislature may have severely curtailed city and village authority to deny a CUP request but it did not have any impact on city council or village board legislative discretion to classify land uses as conditional or permitted or determine how many, if any, conditional uses a city or village should have in a particular zoning district. So, one legally permissible response to the new laws might be elimination of all existing conditional uses in zoning districts or limiting them to a very select group of low-risk uses.

With the new laws, the legislature eliminated much of the prior legal authority cities and villages used to accommodate conditional uses while protecting property interests of adjoining landowners, the stability of neighborhoods, and the well-being of the whole community. Unless a city or village is willing to accept a conditional use in a zoning district – with much less ability to guide when and where it exists – then eliminating them altogether or greatly reducing their availability is a reasonable and legally permissible response.

In addition, cities and villages will need to closely examine their existing conditional use permit requirements set by ordinance. As noted above, they must be reasonable, related to the purpose of the ordinance and, to the extent practicable, measurable. Thus, general requirements for CUPs commonly found in existing zoning ordinances are now suspect and subject to legal challenge. Instead, revised requirements should be information-based. In addition, a city or village will need to show that revised requirements are measurable, unless impracticable. And, if impracticable, they will need to be able demonstrate why.

Conclusion

Conditional use zoning permits have been commonly used by cities and villages to allow riskier land use activities in zoning districts subject to review and conditions. 2017 Wisconsin Act 67 substantially altered the CUP review and condition authority cities and villages have used for the last 75 years. The status quo for conditional uses in Wisconsin has changed dramatically. Cities and villages must now decide how they will respond to these changes. Revisions to CUP requirements in zoning ordinances will be necessary. A thorough review of conditional use designation and inclusion in zoning districts is also warranted.

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About the author:

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