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VBH BOT FYI Zoning

1 message

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Arlington Heights treehouses debate: Fun or eyesore?
By Deborah Donovan
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[PHOTO] Arlington Heights resident Norbert Piotrowski walks in his backyard next to the neighbor's tree house he calls an eyesore. Village officials recently approved new restrictions on treehouse size and location, but they will not apply to existing structures. Mark Welsh | Staff Photographer

Depending on your point of view, treehouses are a traditional rite of summer for suburban children or dangerous eyesores.

In Arlington Heights, where both arguments have been made in recent months, they'll be more regulated than ever under zoning code changes that received preliminary village board approval this week.

A single treehouse that raised a neighborhood ruckus inspired trustees to add tighter restrictions to those previously recommended by staff and the village's Plan Commission.

But Norbert Piotrowski, who says he's been fighting his neighbor's treehouse on the 300 block of North Dwyer Avenue for two years, said he does not think the new rules go far enough.

Under the proposed regulations, a treehouse will be limited to 100 square feet and cannot be taller than 15 feet or the main house. It also must be 5 feet off property lines and 10 feet from the house. The new rules would only affect future buildings, not existing treehouses.

"My opinion is to not allow treehouses," Piotrowski told the board. "They are inherently unstable because they're tied into a growing tree. They could collapse and kill kids. Arlington Heights does not deserve unsafe monstrosities higher than the primary house."

Joe Belmonte, who built the treehouse on Dwyer for his young son, said everyone is entitled to his own opinion.

"As long as the village doesn't ask me to change it or take it down, I don't feel like I'm under attack," he said. "I tried to make something that wasn't an eyesore. It's big, probably too big, but the kids love it."

Trustee Thomas Glasgow, who lives in the same neighborhood, agreed with Piotrowski's complaints about the treehouse. The board accepted Glasgow's recommendation to bar treehouses taller than the main house.

"Everyone else in the neighborhood has lower property values because of this," said Glasgow. "It's the biggest treehouse I have ever seen."

The only vote against the regulations Monday was from Village President Arlene Mulder, who agreed with Village Manager Bill Dixon's advice that it's not wise to issue regulations based on one case.

Dixon urged the board not to overreact and ban treehouses, and said this is the only problem like this he has heard of in the village.

"For decades, even centuries, they have been fun for kids," said Dixon. "Certainly there is some risk, usually taken on by the kids' parents."

Village staff is still discussing whether building permits should be required, said Bill Enright, deputy director of Planning & Community Development. No national organization will write a building code that covers treehouses because they are tied into living trees.

The Belmonte treehouse is estimated to be only 25 square feet larger than the new regulations would allow, and it is only 15 feet tall. It is, however, close to the house and taller than the Belmonte's single-level home, which Enright estimated is 11 or 12 feet high.

Enright pointed out that treehouse zoning standards will be much stricter than those proposed for other accessory buildings, and the village board voted that sheds could be as large as 300 square feet, rather than the 200-square-foot limit recommended by staff and the Plan Commission. He also told trustees that the appearances of residential accessory buildings are not reviewed by the Design Commission.

To trustees worried the rules would make treehouses impossible, he said anyone who wants to build a nonconforming treehouse could seek a variance.

Charles Kobus, permit, inspections and license official for the village, estimated there are about 100 treehouses in Arlington Heights.

"They range from a platform that kids put in a tree to some pretty fancy ones," he said. "I think they are all homemade, but I know there's place in Europe where you can buy plans."

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