

**PLAN COMMISSION
STUDY SESSION NOTES
MAY 20, 2024**

I. Call To Order

The Plan Commission Study Session was called to order at 6:00 P.M. by President Tom Anderson at the Schererville Town Hall, 10 E. Joliet St.

A. Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

B. Roll Call

Roll Call was taken with the following members present: President Tom Anderson, Vice-President William Jarvis, Secretary Gary Immig, Mr. Robert Kocon and Mr. Tom Kouros. Staff present: Town Manager James Gorman, Director of Operations Andrew Hansen, and Recording Secretary Megan Schiltz. Absent were Mr. Myles Long, Mr. Chris Rak, and Planning & Building Administrator Denise Sulek. In the audience was Councilman Tom Schmitt.

II. Commission Business

A. 8101 Wicker Ave. – Northwood Falls (Proposed: NightFalls/Trail Enhancement)

General Location: 8101 Wicker Ave – Eagle River Northwoods Addition, Lot 1,
Ex. E. 135 Ft. of S. 125 Ft. of N. 215 Ft.

Petitioner(s): Jeff Conti

Request: U.S. 41 Commercial Corridor Overlay District Development Review

Mr. Jeff Conti from Northwoods Falls represented the petitioners. Mr. Conti stated that Code Enforcer Sam DeCero, had brought to their attention that they would need Plan Commission approval for the trail they have behind Northwood Falls; adding that he has been a builder for 35 years and it had not occurred to him that he would need approval for a trail with lights and decoration. Mr. Conti went on to say that he had built the cabins as part of the trail that are a “window to the world” type of decoration. Mr. Conti stated the cabins have windows with TV screens in them that would broadcast the different things that they would have for the 4th of July and Christmas. Mr. Conti said that NightFalls was inspired by Morton Arboretum in DuPage County, IL which uses stage lighting and lasers on the trees to make the perfect projection screen; going on to say it is a special show at Christmas time and wanted to do the same thing but have it year round. Mr. Conti went on to say that he was aware when purchasing Northwood Falls that it was a great business during the weekends but does not make much money on weekdays and have tried various things to bring business; adding that with 100 employees it is just not a viable business during the week. Mr. Conti said that about a year and a half ago he and his wife started looking into doing things to bring more business. Mr. Conti stated that because they do not get tourists, in order for this to work they would need to change themes. Mr. Conti went on to say that the trail would be inspired by music and that with Northwood Falls being a live music venue, the customer walking the trail would be hearing the different bands that play at Northwoods Falls on the speakers. Mr. Conti added that the lights are programmed to move with the music and that they plan to have water features to move with the music as well. Mr. Conti informed the board that he had built six cabins, with a seventh that is used as a shed that has all the electronics stored in there. Mr. Conti stated that there are eight windows in the back with moving lights that light up the vegetation on the south side of the pond and is programed based on the foliage. Mr. Conti stated that at this time of the year the lights hit the trees fully, but in the winter they had programed it so it swoops down on the pond and wouldn’t blast anybody on the other sides of the trees with the lights in their homes. Mr. Conti went on to say that this would be a paid attraction that would cost \$10 per person. Mr. Conti added that NightFalls has been open since October 2023 and had the lights change for St. Patrick’s Day, Valentine’s Day, and

Christmas. Mr. Conti said that although this has not been completed yet, they had planned to open last week but are now pushing it back a few weeks for approval.

Mr. Anderson asked Mr. Conti if what they had been put in was completed without permits or inspections. Mr. Conti responded that was correct and that he believes if anything it would be just the cabins that would need inspection. Mr. Conti continued to say that the cabins are tethered to the ground in case of heavy winds, they are not habitable and people cannot walk in them. Mr. Conti stated that the original idea was to do a cabin frame with a screen that they would project on to, but were worried it would get damaged easily by kids. Mr. Conti said that at Halloween they plan to do a Legends Be Hallow theme so the buildings would double as something to tell, with elves telling a story at Christmas time; adding that in his opinion there is not anything that would require permitting. Mr. Jarvis asked what kind of electrical do they have all over the area. Mr. Conti replied that right now just extension cords. Mr. Jarvis stated that permits and inspections would be necessary for safety issues. Mr. Conti said that they use I65 cords that are sealed and run in a very safe way. Mr. Conti added that they had looked at getting electrical done before the winter and had talked to Foster Electric, but it cost too much to run overhead and didn't have much time. Mr. Conti went on to say that he does not believe they had violated any codes because they are basically just like landscape lighting. Mr. Jarvis asked if they were low or high voltage. Mr. Conti replied low voltage. Mr. Jarvis asked who owned the house in the back property. Mr. Conti replied Craig and Marybeth and that they love the lights and music; adding that the property is 10 acres and that the trail only takes up a portion of that. Mr. Anderson stated that the electrical and the building inspectors would have to go out to make sure it meets code. Mr. Gorman stated that extension cords do not meet code. Mr. Jarvis said they will need to find out what the cabins are mounted on. Mr. Conti stated that he had pictures showing the entire building process and that they are cemented into the ground like a deck would be. Mr. Conti went on to say that they had started out as little decks and then decided to add walls around it that are well built. Mr. Jarvis stated that he understands because they have little buildings at the Tri Town Safety Village, but would still need an overview on how they were mounted. Mr. Conti added that they plan on putting electric into them and that they already have 300 amps for the extension cords so they would not be needing to add anything.

Mr. Anderson stated that they would need a plan for electric that inspection would approve and that it must be to code. Mr. Jarvis added that they need more details on how these are together and how they are mounted to the ground. Mr. Anderson stated that the building and electrical inspectors would need to sign off that it meets code. Mr. Anderson then asked how high the lights are and if they are only in the trees. Mr. Conti responded that the lights are mostly on the ground shining up on the trees and that they intend to also use lasers. Mr. Immig asked if the log playground would be for kids or adults. Mr. Conti replied that the playground has not been built yet, but would be something very simple for kids. Mr. Immig then asked if there are specs on the Town of Schererville Ordinance about commercial playgrounds. Mr. Gorman replied that he does not recall. Mr. Anderson stated that he does not remember seeing that in the ordinance; adding that this is a very interesting concept, however, the concern is if it was made up to code. Mr. Conti stated that he wouldn't say that this would even be low voltage, it is more low wattage that would not need much power. Mr. Anderson repeated that they just need to make sure it is up to code. Mr. Immig asked if Mr. Conti would need to come back in for approval. Mr. Anderson replied that he would because they need to make sure that it meets code before a public hearing. Mr. Gorman stated that this is in the Overlay District so any work being done on that property needs to go before the board. Mr. Conti stated that he did not realize that until Ms. Sulek told him. Mr. Jarvis asked with the new ordinance would it still be 800ft. off of Route 41 that the Overlay District goes. Mr. Gorman replied that he thinks it varies but would have to check, however his property is closer than 800 ft. Mr. Anderson said to get the detailed plans together and have it meet code and pass inspection. Mr. Gorman asked Mr. Anderson if they should have another study session. Mr. Anderson said they should have another study session and then asked if the Town of Schererville Electrical Inspector Mike Szany had been out there yet. Mr. Gorman replied that he does not believe so and that it was Mr. DeCero that notified the Town. Mr. Conti responded that only the Fire Inspectors have been out. Mr. Anderson said to make sure what they are doing meets code and it would have to pass with the building and electrical inspectors; going on to say that they should get with Ms. Sulek to know what codes would be needed. Mr. Gorman stated that they need to come back for another study session to make sure it meets code and then would get scheduled for a primary before receiving permits.

III. Adjournment

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 6:21 P.M.