



November Case Law Update November 30, 2017

A summary of Wisconsin court opinions decided during the month of November related to planning

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There are no planning-related decisions to report for the month of November from the United States Supreme Court, the Wisconsin Supreme Court, or the Wisconsin Court of Appeals. **However, there was legislation enacted in Wisconsin during the month of November that changes the law related to recent U.S. Supreme Court and Wisconsin Supreme Court decisions reported in previous APA-WI case law updates over the past few months. This case law update summarizes the legislative changes to insure that members have the most current updates on the law in these areas.**

New Legislation Affecting Substandard Lots: Responding to *Murr v. Wisconsin*

In November, the Wisconsin Legislature passed legislation in response to the United States Supreme Court decision last June in [Murr v. Wisconsin](#). The *Murr* decision, summarized in the [June 2017 APA-WI Case Law Update](#), involved a provision in the St. Croix County Zoning Ordinance that merged two substandard lots (referred to as “nonconforming lots” in many local ordinances) under common ownership for purposes of the application of the zoning ordinance and prohibited the owner from selling one of the substandard lots. The County’s ordinance followed rules promulgated by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources for protecting the Lower St. Croix River after its designation by Congress as a National Wild and Scenic River. The U.S. Supreme Court decision articulated a new test for determining the relevant parcel for regulatory takings analysis and concluded St. Croix County’s lot merger provision did not constitute a regulatory taking requiring the payment of just compensation. The new legislation, signed into law by Governor Walker as [2017 Wisconsin Act 67](#), places new limitations on the authority of local governments and state agencies to enact or enforce lot merger provisions similar to the one found in the St. Croix County Zoning Ordinance. In addition, Act 67 includes provisions affecting substandard lots in general.

The new substandard lot/lot merger limitations are found in Sections 23 through 26 of Act 67. Those sections create several additions to the existing section of the Wisconsin Statutes entitled “Limitation on Development Regulation Authority and Downzoning” found at section 66.10015 of the Wisconsin Statutes. Act 67 adds the following definition of a “substandard lot”: “A legally created lot or parcel that met any applicable lot size requirements when it was created, but does not meet current lot size requirements.” [Wis. Stat. § 66.10015\(1\)\(e\)](#).

Act 67 then prohibits cities, villages, towns, and counties from enacting or enforcing ordinances or taking any other action that prohibits a property owner from conveying an ownership interest in a substandard lot or from using a substandard lot as a building site if the substandard lot does not have any structures placed partly upon an adjacent lot **and** the substandard lot is developed to comply with all other ordinances of the political subdivision. Wis. Stat. § 66.10015(2(e)).

Finally, Act 67 prohibits cities, villages, towns, counties, and state agencies from enacting or enforcing any ordinance or administrative rule or taking any other action that requires one or more lots to be merged with another lot, for any purpose, without the consent of the owners of the lots that are to be merged. Wis. Stat. § 66.10015(4).

While local governments did not need to make changes their ordinances in response to the *Murr* decision, Act 67, effective November 28th, should prompt local governments and state agencies to review their ordinances and rules as follows:

- Cities, villages, towns, counties, and state agencies need to review their ordinances and rules to insure they do not require the merger of lots (both substandard lots and lots that conform to current ordinances and rules) without the consent of the owners of the lots that are to be merged.
- Cities, villages, towns and counties need to review their ordinances and practices related to substandard lots to ensure that they do not prohibit a property owner from selling or otherwise conveying an ownership interest in a substandard lot to another person or entity.
- In addition, cities, villages, towns and counties need to review their ordinances and practices to ensure they allow the use of a substandard lot as a building site if the substandard lot has never had a structure straddling the substandard lot and an adjacent lot. Any development on the substandard lot must conform to all other applicable ordinances. The application of other ordinances may limit what can be built on a substandard lot.

New Legislation Affecting Conditional Use Permits: Responding to *AllEnergy Corp. v. Trempealeau County*

[2017 Wisconsin Act 67](#) also includes changes to Wisconsin law governing conditional use permits following the recent decision of the Wisconsin Supreme Court in [AllEnergy Corp. v. Trempealeau County](#) reported in the [May 2017 APA-WI Case Law Update](#). The *AllEnergy* case involved the denial of a conditional use permit for a proposed frac sand mine in Trempealeau County. The County voted to adopt 37 conditions for the mine, which AllEnergy agreed to meet, but then the County voted to deny the conditional use permit in part relying on public testimony in opposition to the mine. A divided Wisconsin Supreme Court upheld the County's denial of the conditional use permit acknowledging the discretionary authority of local governments in reviewing proposed conditional uses.

Act 67 follows the line of reasoning articulated by the dissent in the *AllEnergy* decision and limits local government discretion related to the issuance of conditional use permits. According to the Dissent in *AllEnergy*: “When the Trempealeau County Board writes its zoning code, or considers amendments, . . . is the stage at which the County has the greatest discretion in determining what may, and may not, be allowed on various tracts of property.” “Upon adding a conditional use to a zoning district, the municipality rejects, by that very act, the argument that the listed use is incompatible with the district.” “An application for a conditional use permit is not an invitation to re-open that debate. A permit application is, instead, an opportunity to determine whether the specific instantiation of the conditional use can be accomplished within the standards identified by the zoning ordinance.”

Act 67 adds new sections governing the issuance of conditional use permits to the various general zoning enabling laws for cities, villages, towns, and counties. Until the addition of these sections, the law governing conditional use permits was based on court decisions. The various local general zoning enabling laws did not include any references to the term “conditional use.”

The new law adds the following definition of “conditional use” to the Statutes: “‘Conditional use’ means a use allowed under a conditional use permit, special exception, or other zoning permission issued by a [city, village, town, county] but does not include a variance.”

Act 67 also includes the following definition of “substantial evidence,” a term used in several places in the Act: “‘Substantial evidence’ means facts and information, 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.” This language softens the language of earlier versions of the bill that stated substantial evidence did not include “public comment that is based solely on personal opinion, uncorroborated hearsay, or speculation.” Public comment that provides reasonable facts and information related to the conditions of the permit is accepted under Act 67 as evidence.

Act 67 then provides that “if an applicant for a conditional use permit meets or agrees to meet all of the requirements and conditions specified in the [city, village, town, county] ordinance or imposed by the [city, village, town, county] zoning board, the [city, village, town, county] shall grant the conditional use permit.” This new language follows the argument made by the plaintiffs and the dissenting opinion in the *AllEnergy* case. The use of the term “zoning board,” however, is at odds with current Wisconsin law that allows the governing body, the plan commission, or the zoning board of adjustment/appeals to grant conditional uses. This “zoning board” terminology may lead to some confusion.

Act 67 also provides that the conditions imposed “must be related to the purpose of the ordinance and be based on substantial evidence” and “must be reasonable and to the extent practicable, measurable and may include conditions such as the permit’s duration, transfer, or renewal.” In the past, sometimes there was confusion about whether local governments had the authority to place a time limit on the duration of a conditional use permit. This new

statutory language clarifies that local government have that authority. Since local comprehensive plans can help articulate the purpose of ordinances that implement the plan, the requirement in Act 67 that the conditions relate to the purpose of the ordinance emphasize the importance of having a condition in the zoning ordinance that the proposed conditional use furthers and does not conflict with the local comprehensive plan.

Next, Act 67 provides that the applicant must present substantial evidence “that the application and all requirements and conditions established by the [city, village, town, county] relating to the conditional use are or shall be satisfied.” The city, village, town or county’s “decision to approve or deny the permit must be supported by substantial evidence.”

Under the new law, a local government must hold a public hearing on a conditional use permit application, following publication of a class 2 notice. If a local government denies an application for a conditional use, the applicant may appeal the decision to circuit court. The conditional use permit can be revoked if the applicant does not follow the conditions imposed in the permit.

The new conditional use law applies to applications for conditional use permits filed on and after November 28, 2017.

While local governments did not need to change their ordinances in response to the *AllEnergy* decision, Act 67 should prompt local governments to review their zoning ordinance to ensure they meet the new statutory requirements. Local governments should review the requirements of their ordinance to consider adding to or revising the conditions listed in the ordinance to ensure that the local government will be able to review specific development proposals against the purpose of the ordinance and be able to support conditions imposed on a specific application with substantial evidence. Act 67 may prompt some local governments to reconsider what might be listed as a conditional use in certain zoning districts and explore creating new districts or other ways to regulate the use.

U.S. Court of Appeals for the 7th Circuit Opinions

[No planning-related cases to report.]