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## City Council considering creation of Tourism Zone in Winchester

By BRIAN BREHM The Winchester Star  
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Winchester already has an Enterprise Zone, a Technology Zone and an Opportunity Zone to offer financial incentives to qualifying businesses. Now City Council is considering the creation of a [Tourism Zone](#).

Winchester Economic Development Director Jeff Buettner told council's Finance Committee this week that the state allows localities to create Tourism Zones, which are geographic areas that offer financial benefits for the development of tourism-related businesses including hotels, restaurants, retail stores, facilities for sports and meetings, outdoor recreation areas, theme parks and event venues.

"It's a whole host of entities that are considered tourism-based," Buettner said.

A Tourism Zone would be similar to Winchester's three existing development zones, all of which come with state and local financial perks including fee waivers, loans, grants and/or tax breaks to attract particular types of businesses:

[Enterprise Zone](#) — Split into two sections, one north of Cork Street and the other south of Jubal Early Drive, its incentives are available to commercial, industrial and mixed-use property developments.

[Technology Zone](#) — Located downtown, it offers incentives for up to 10 years for qualified technology, research, and telecom businesses.

[Opportunity Zone](#) — An area defined within the boundaries of Cork Street, North Loudoun Street, Interstate 81 and Winchester's northeast city limits, it provides incentives to investors who create new or revitalized commercial, mixed-use and residential developments.

Buettner said a Tourism Zone in Winchester could entice development of new tourism-related businesses while also providing incentives to existing businesses that meet the zone's criteria and want to expand operations.

"We don't really have anything in our tool box that does that specifically," he told the Finance Committee at its meeting on Wednesday.

As proposed, the Tourism Zone would include two sections, the Downtown Tourism Zone and the Greater Winchester Tourism Zone. Both would be located within the boundaries of the four Neighborhood Design Districts (NDDs) being implemented in each of Winchester's four wards in an attempt to focus future residential and business development in those locations. So far, two of the NDDs — Cider Hill in Ward 1 and Cedar Valley in Ward 4 — have been approved by City Council. The remaining two — the Berryville Avenue NDD and the Old Town NDD — are currently going through the approval process.

Buettner said one of the benefits of a Tourism Zone is that it would make qualified businesses eligible for a Virginia tourism grant that would "essentially pay for 10%" of any qualified development within the zone.

"We can't access that now because we don't have a Tourism Zone," Buettner said.

Currently, 47 localities in Virginia have created a total of 77 Tourism Zones, "so it's not an uncommon thing," Buettner said. "We've just never done it."

Tourism Zones can be as large or as small as a locality wants. For example, Buettner said Shenandoah County declared all of its land as a Tourism Zone three years ago. Winchester would limit its zone to the four NDDs, he said, because those are the areas where council wants to focus future development.

Once a Tourism Zone is established, local governments can adjust the boundaries as needed without requesting approval from the state.

The Finance Committee voted unanimously to forward Winchester's Tourism Zone proposal to City Council with a recommendation of approval. Council could take up the matter as soon as Tuesday evening when it holds its next business meeting in Rouss City Hall.

To learn more about the city's Tourism Zone proposal, visit <https://bit.ly/4qjrLYj>.

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