



**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT,  
NEIGHBORHOODS, AND STRATEGIC  
PLANNING DEPARTMENT**

**M E M O R A N D U M**

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**DATE:** February 27, 2008  
**TO:** Ray Giometti, Planning Commission Chair  
Members of the Planning Commission  
**FROM:** Angie Mathias, Assistant Planner  
**SUBJECT:** **Docket- 06-15 Towing**

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**ISSUE:** Should the City allow towing operations to occur in zones other than the Industrial Heavy and Industrial Medium zones?

**BACKGROUND:** In the City of Renton towing services are linked as a land use with auto impoundment yard and are only allowed in the Industrial Heavy (IH) and Industrial Medium (IM) zones. Due to this, smaller scale tow operations have found it difficult to conduct business in the City. In August 2006, Mr. Lee Isben owner of Lee's Towing Service L.L.C. requested that the City allow towing operations/impound facilities as a land use in the Industrial Light (IL) and Commercial Arterial (CA) zones in addition to the IH and IM zones. Mr. Isben also suggested some specific conditions for approval of such land use in those zones. The suggested conditions that apply to zoning code are:

- Vehicle storage must be contained inside a building. There are to be no exceptions to this requirement.
- No heavy-duty (Class C) tow trucks and/or trucks that exceed 26,000 gross vehicle weight will be permitted on the premises.

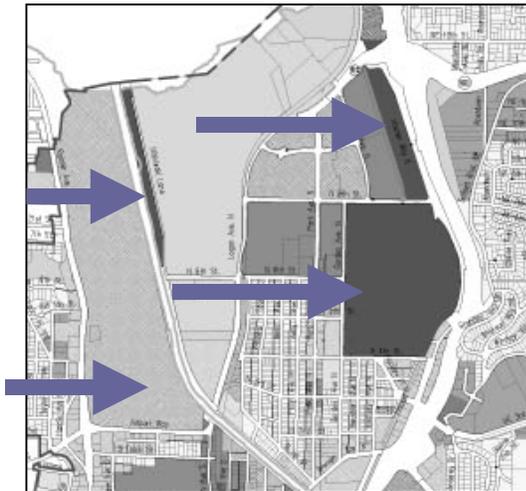
According to the Washington State Department of Licensing there are six classifications of tow trucks, those are:

- Class A – Trucks that are capable of towing and recovery of passenger cars, pickup trucks, small trailers, or equivalent vehicles.
- Class B – Trucks that are capable of towing and/or recovery of medium size trucks, trailers, motor homes, or equivalent vehicles.
- Class C – Trucks that are capable of towing and/or recovery of large trucks, trailers, buses, motor homes, or similar vehicles.
- Class D – Trucks that are equipped for and primarily used as “wheel lift” trucks.
- Class E – Trucks designed and intended to transport vehicles entirely on a truck bed.

- Class S – Tow or recovery trucks that cannot meet the requirements of Class “A”, “B”, “C”, “D”, or “E” and are not eligible for waiver per WAC 204-91A-070(4).

Mr. Isben also made several other suggestions that include conditions such as keeping the property clean, following safety and environmental measures without exception, and requiring inspection by the Washington State Patrol and City of Renton. Many of these suggested conditions are items that would be required in either City of Renton code or the Revised Code of Washington. For example, an inspection of facilities and tow trucks by Washington State Patrol is an annual requirement under RCW 46.55.040.

Currently, City code only permits towing services/impound yards outright in the IH zone. In the IM zone they are allowed as a hearing examiner conditional use and are excluded in the area south of Interstate 405 and north of Southwest 16<sup>th</sup> Street. As shown in the maps below the locations of these two zones are primarily in the valley area and near the urban center. It is difficult to identify in the maps included below, but the parcel sizes in the IH zone are very large (typically approximately 5 acres) and the parcels in the IM zone are also large (typically approximately 2 acres). There are a few smaller parcels located north of Grady Way and west of Oaksdale Avenue SW (typically approximately .62 acres), of these smaller parcels most are occupied with a use or owned by a public entity. This was one of the issues cited by Mr. Isben as a difficulty in properly locating a towing operation. He stated that the properties that were available in a zoning designation that allows towing were large and therefore expensive. Further, he stated that the property owners of the large parcels were unwilling to subdivide their property into smaller sizes that would then be lower priced.



**ISSUE DISCUSSION:** In order to evaluate Mr. Ibsen's request to allow towing operations in the IL and CA staff referred to the purpose statements for the two zones. The purpose statement for the IL zone reads:

*"The purpose of the Light Industrial Zone (IL) is to provide areas for low-intensity manufacturing, industrial services, distribution, storage, and technical schools. It is intended to implement the Employment Area Industrial, Employment Area Valley, and Commercial Corridor designation of the Comprehensive Plan. Uses allowed in this zone are generally contained within buildings. Material and/or equipment used in production are not stored outside. Activities in this zone do not generate external emissions such as smoke, odor, noise, vibrations, or other nuisances outside the building. Compatible uses that directly serve the needs of other uses in the zone are also allowed."*

With the condition that the vehicles being kept by the tow operation are kept entirely within a building, a tow operation would meet the purpose of the IL zone. It is recommended that tow operations/auto impoundment be allowed in the IL zone when it is located within a building and subject to other limitations.

The purpose statement for the CA zone reads:

*"The purpose of the Commercial Arterial Zone (CA) is to evolve from "strip commercial" linear business districts to business areas characterized by enhanced site planning, incorporating efficient parking lot design, coordinated access, amenities and boulevard treatment. The CA Zone provides for a wide variety of indoor and outdoor retail sales and services along high-volume traffic corridors. Limited residential uses may be integrated into the zone if there are permanent physical connections to commercial uses. The zone includes five designated business districts along mapped corridors with development standards designed to encourage concentrated commercial activity, a focal point of pedestrian activity along the corridor, and visual interest. Designated business districts include: Automall, Sunset Boulevard, Northeast Fourth, Puget Drive, and Rainier Avenue. The CA Zone is intended to implement the Commercial Corridor Comprehensive Plan designation."*

In the CA zone a large-scale building that stores automobiles is not indoor or outdoor retail sales, but does provide a service. However, this zone also seeks to encourage residential use and pedestrian activity particularly in the business districts. In fact, the business districts allow a maximum residential density of 60 dwelling units/acre in mixed use developments with height limit of 50 feet. It is likely that an indoor tow operation/impoundment yard would be a single story building. Business districts are located in gateway and highly commercial areas of the City and are prominent nodes of activity for their surrounding neighborhoods and seek to encourage pedestrian activity. A towing facility is not a business type that pedestrians would engage in linked activities to and from, nor one that people would want to live next to. A linked activity for a pedestrian would be when a person parks in one spot and visits multiple stores or services without moving their vehicle. A person may go to a tow yard to retrieve their vehicle as a pedestrian, but are unlikely to have traveled to their destination for the purpose of visiting other services or shops. However, the zone does intend to allow services and towing is a service.

In order to encourage linked visits and emphasize the service aspect of towing rather than the storing of vehicles, it may be reasonable to allow towing operations/auto impoundment when it is an accessory use to another auto related use, such as vehicle repair shops. A large building that has only a single use of storing vehicles would likely lack features that make it an appealing building to walk by. A building that stored a limited number of vehicles would have less impact on the pedestrian environment. Accessory uses are defined as:

*“Uses customarily incidental and subordinate to the principal use and typically located upon the same lot occupied by the principal use. Some accessory uses are specifically listed, particularly where a use is only allowed in an accessory form, whereas other accessory uses are determined by the Development Services Division on a case-by-case basis per RMC [4-2-050C4](#) and C6, Accessory Use Interpretations and Unclassified Uses.”*

So, it may be reasonable to allow towing operations/auto impoundment yards in the CA zone when it is accessory to a body shop or vehicle service and repair primary use. Additionally, the number of stored vehicles would be limited to a specified number, the tow vehicles would be required to be garaged, and other limitations. Additionally, in order to continue to encourage the gateway function, pedestrian focus, and mixed-use high density residential development of the business districts it may be appropriate to only allow towing operations/auto impoundment yards in the CA zone outside the business districts and other prominent gateway locations in the CA zone.

**COMPREHENSIVE PLAN COMPLIANCE:** The allowance of a service operation such as towing services/auto impoundment complies with the purpose statement for the commercial corridor designation, which is implemented with both the CA zone and the IL zone. Objective LU-DDD reads in part: *“The Commercial land use designation should include: businesses that provide necessary or desirable goods and services to the larger community. However, the same objective also states that the designation should include: “projects that may be highly visible from principal arterial, uses that are dependent upon or benefiting from high-volume traffic, and uses that provide significant employment.”* To achieve a balance of this objective it will be important to place limitations on the towing services/auto impoundment businesses.

**CONCLUSION:** Staff is looking forward to discussion and input from the Planning Commission on this matter prior to making recommendations.