



Houston & Texas News

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City orders Houston developers to share park costs

Builders must provide open land or pay fees, but critics fear home prices will rise as a result

By MIKE SNYDER
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The Houston City Council decided Wednesday that residential developers must share the costs of ensuring that future generations of Houstonians enjoy access to parks and green space as their city grows.

The council voted unanimously to require developers to provide land or pay fees for acquiring new parks, effective Nov. 1. Until now, money to acquire land for parks in Houston has come mainly from private donations.

Mayor Bill White hailed the vote as a historic signal that city officials are attuned to quality of life issues as well as to the needs of business and industry.

"Citizens should know that no special interest pulls the strings at City Hall," White said.

Developers gained some concessions Wednesday when the council agreed to reduce the park fees for all residential development from \$800 to \$700 per housing unit and to reduce the amount of land required for single-family developments.

The draft recommended by city staff included different formulas to calculate the land required for single- and multi-family developments. A developer who built 100 apartments, for example, would have to provide 1.8 acres, while a 100-house single-family development would require 2.6 acres.

The council agreed Wednesday to apply the 1.8-acre standard to single- and multi-family developments.

Despite the amendments, leaders of development groups said the ordinance could push new development out of the city and add costs that could put home ownership out of reach for some Houstonians.

"This ordinance will have a negative effect on homeownership and housing affordability," Adam Aschmann, governmental affairs director for the Greater Houston Builders Association, said in a letter to White and the council.

Wednesday's vote came after about two hours of discussion on a host of amendments offered by

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The panel took action on the following items:

- **Preservation:** Unanimously approved a historic district designation for the Avondale West area.
- **Health:** Unanimously approved authority to spend up to \$6.5 million over several years to local agencies providing HIV/AIDS prevention services. The initial payments come mostly from federal grant funds.
- **Development:** Unanimously approved changes to the city's development code intended to prevent developers from circumventing neighborhood-based minimum lot size requirements by building condominiums rather than single-family homes. Some neighborhood groups contend that these changes don't fully solve the problem.

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council members, some of which ultimately were withdrawn. The vote to reduce the single-family acreage requirement was unanimous, while Councilwoman Pam Holm cast the only vote against reducing the fee.

Holm said she was worried that a lower fee would encourage developers to pay the fee rather than provide land in or near their developments, which she said would be preferable.

But Councilwoman Anne Clutterbuck, who offered the amendment lowering the fee, said she was concerned about adding costs that could price low- or moderate-income families out of the house market.

Neighborhoods' influence

Passage of the parks ordinance coincides with intensifying discussions of policies that could affect Houston's historically powerful development industry. Neighborhood groups are clamoring for better tools to manage growth and development, particularly in the city's rapidly changing core.

White, during Wednesday's discussion, agreed that a comprehensive approach is needed but warned of the potential "unintended consequences" of far-reaching new controls on development and land use.

Passed to consumers?

Aschmann said city officials should be aware that every new regulation or fee for developers carries a cost that must be passed on to consumers.

"Should we continue down a path of continually increasing regulations and continually increasing fees?" Aschmann asked. "We feel very strongly that there has to be a balance" between encouraging growth and development and managing its impact.

Joe Householder, a longtime local political observer who heads the Houston office of Public Strategies, an Austin-based communications and business consulting firm, said the parks ordinance and other city initiatives that affect developers are a sign of changing times.

"It's not so much that (developers') clout is on the decline, but there are other groups that are gaining clout," he said.

"I think there's an increased level of public sophistication out there," which is helping neighborhood-based groups gain more influence at City Hall, Householder said.

Split into 17 districts

The ordinance divides Houston into 17 districts, and land provided by developers for parks must be in the same district as their housing development. Several council members worried that most developers would opt to pay the fee because buying the land would cost them more.

Many cities across the country have passed similar laws over the past 20 years, including Austin and Fort Worth and several Houston suburbs.

Parks advocates said the measure represents an important first step. They noted that White and the council agreed to gather data on the effectiveness of the ordinance and consider changing the requirements in six months.

"We have an ordinance today, and yesterday we didn't," said Diane Schenke, executive director of the Park People, a Houston nonprofit. "In six months, I think it's going to be a case of adjusting the ordinance to achieve the desired results."

Joe Turner, the city's parks and recreation director, said he was delighted.

"I think today is a good day for the city of Houston," Turner said. "It's a great opportunity for us to acquire green space and work along with our developers to have a great city."

Staff writer Matt Stiles contributed to this report.

mike.snyder@chron.com

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molloaggie wrote:

tbidder:

As an inside-the-looper, I have seen older homes built in the 1940's leveled and the developers build 3 or more \$300K+ homes on the quarter-acre lot, building up the base by several feet to accommodate the White Oak Bayou flood plane. This then makes the few remaining older homes sit in a hole to collect floodwaters. It's not right.

I think this is a very valid complaint. If a new home owner and developer blocks the tradition flow of drainage, then the other homeowner *does* have the right to sue. They shouldn't have to put up with that kind of crud. I have heard of two cases like this but honestly I never heard how they turned out.

On the flip side, I am glad that the new homeowners spent the extra dough to raise their house and prevent taxpayers from bailing them out sometime in the future.

10/11/2007 9:50:19 PM

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Blueski wrote:

Any amount of parkland would help the city. Houston is one of the ugliest cities I've ever seen. Nothing to look at except concrete and ugly boxes.

10/11/2007 2:47:14 PM

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AGeorge wrote:

Does this apply to existing parks that need to be cleaned-up to the standards of the



improved neighborhoods?

10/11/2007 1:48:11 PM

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ItsMine wrote:

Some developers are sloppy in building too many ugly-boxy-McMansion and gas stations with full of searing hot concrete and no landscape. So, it's good to force them to got little greener.

And, I want a park so we don't have to hang out at the Dunkin' Donut parking lot.

10/11/2007 12:58:47 PM

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buck16 wrote:

Will work as well as the city requires businesses to upkeep their greenery on their land ... which means pretty much not at all.

10/11/2007 12:50:59 PM

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