



Front page

Feb. 27, 2008, 11:17PM

High-rise would fail new city standards

Ashby project must be changed if it is to follow traffic revision

By CAROLYN FEIBEL
Copyright 2008 Houston Chronicle

The proposed Ashby high-rise would not win approval under the city's new traffic-impact rules without changes to the developers' plan, Mayor Bill White said Wednesday.

Plans for the 23-story Ashby project originally called for 226 residential units, shops, a restaurant and a five-story parking garage at 1717 Bissonnet by the adjoining Southampton and Boulevard Oaks neighborhoods.

"So, if they just propose what they proposed in August, it's not going to meet our standard," White said.

The standard was contained in a set of three criteria unveiled during Wednesday's City Council meeting by White. The criteria were developed as clarification of a decades-old ordinance the mayor wants to use to force traffic revisions from the Ashby developers, if needed.

The developers of the Ashby project, Matthew Morgan and Kevin Kirton of Buckhead Investment Partners, did not return calls for comment.

The City Council indicated its support of White's approach by shelving a draft ordinance that had been the subject of debate for many months. Instead, the city will take public discussion for six months, and use an old city law on driveways to force traffic revisions from the Ashby developers, if needed.

The driveway law dates back to 1940, though its current form began to take shape in 1968. White acknowledged that reviving this broadly worded law might have a "chilling" effect on growth, so he circulated a memo Wednesday with criteria on how it would be applied. The memo said developments that meet three criteria will receive "more intense scrutiny" of their traffic loads. The criteria are:

- A location where 60 percent or more of the properties within a 500-foot radius are residential
- Driveways that feed onto local or collector streets instead of a major thoroughfare
- A net increase of 50 additional vehicles going to and from the development during rush hours. To mitigate the traffic effects, developers might have to add turning lanes or lights, scale back the number of apartments, or change the type of stores, White said.

Enforcement comes from the city's power to reject a site plan, which shows where driveways connect to public streets.

The city will use these "interim procedures" while gathering public comment through July 1, the memo said. By Aug. 1, the city will issue a new proposal for regulating traffic from high-density developments. But it was unclear if this meant a new ordinance or the adjustment or tightening of current ordinances or policies.

"We are listening to everybody's concerns," Councilwoman Anne Clutterbuck said. "It's an extremely complex process, and one size does not fit all."

Chris Amandes, co-chair of the Stop Ashby High-Rise task force, said he was fine with the mayor's new strategy.

"They are continuing along the same lines as the high-density ordinance, but this has the additional advantage of not having to pass City Council," Amandes said.

Residents are protesting the tower project, saying it will have a negative impact on their neighborhood with more traffic on the two-lane Bissonnet.

Previously, the developers had agreed to hold off on submitting project plans and applications until Friday. But White said he doubts the developers will act soon after that, especially in light of the new policy.

The developers also are discussing compromises with foes that could result in a design change, Amandes said.

carolyn.feibel@chron.com

RESOURCES

OTHER COUNCIL ACTION

• **Soccer site:** Delayed for a week a \$15.5 million purchase of land downtown that is being considered as a possible home for a Dynamo stadium.

• **East downtown:** Delayed for a week a related proposal that would pay for the land purchase through a downtown tax increment reinvestment zone.

• **Crime lab training:** Delayed for a week a \$64,000 contract to train workers in forensic analysis of firearms.

HOUSTON POLITICS

Blogging City Hall and Harris County government.