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Former Mayor Bob Lanier, shown last year, said he shares the concern that increasing regulations could add to the cost of new housing in Houston.

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Bob Lanier puts his weight behind builders

Former mayor joins campaign against development regulations he says hurt the city

By MIKE SNYDER

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Former Mayor Bob Lanier has joined prominent home builders and developers campaigning to limit new development regulations they believe could threaten Houston's growth.

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Lanier's comments are part of a nascent effort to respond to recent city laws and policies, including a high-density development ordinance now being written, that affect the politically powerful real estate industry.

A new organization, Houstonians for Responsible Growth, which has begun the process of registering as a political action committee, is coordinating the campaign, said Ken Hoagland, a political consultant working with the group.

Lanier's involvement came in a letter delivered Dec. 27 to all 14 City Council members and Mayor Bill White. It also was signed by Leo Linbeck Jr., owner of a major local construction company, and Richard Weekley, a prominent developer and home builder.

"We are writing you because of our growing concern that the city is embarking, with the best of intentions, down a path of more extensive planning and regulations, many of which have ill-served cities across our nation," the letter states.

The public involvement of people with the stature of Lanier, Linbeck and Weekley suggests there's a well-organized effort to preserve Houston's traditional laissez-faire approach to land-use regulation.

Along with the letter, council members received copies of a book by Randal O'Toole, an economist associated with the libertarian Cato Institute, about the perils of government planning.

Lanier said he agreed to sign the letter because he shares the concern that increasing regulations could add to the cost of new housing in Houston and price young families and first-time buyers out of the market.

"Each unit of additional cost knocks off a certain number of people from buying a home," said Lanier, who served as mayor from 1992 to 1998. "It's a serious error, in my judgment, to undertake to demonize the development industry."

Examples of the trend toward greater regulation, developers say, are a recent ordinance requiring residential developers to help pay for parks and the creation of a protected historic district in the Old Sixth Ward west of downtown.

Houston's low housing prices are among its chief economic assets, Lanier said, and policies that increase prices could make companies hesitant to locate their businesses here.

Weekley, speaking Monday to a City Council committee reviewing the high-density development ordinance, said the number of families who can afford to buy a median-priced home in Houston is declining, and new regulations could aggravate this problem.

"If you'd like for your children and grandchildren to buy a house in Houston, you need to be careful about unintended consequences," Weekley said.

The city's work on the high-density development ordinance, which would require developers of certain projects to take steps to ease traffic congestion, was prompted by an outcry from neighborhoods near the site of a planned 23-story building near Rice University known as the Ashby high-rise.

White defends city's efforts

Some of the leaders of Houstonians for Responsible Growth are real estate professionals serving on a "stakeholders group" advising city officials about the high-density ordinance. Lanier, however, said his concern is about more than one project or ordinance.

"In the aggregate, they're much more significant than just Ashby," Lanier said.

White has characterized his administration's development proposals as narrowly focused efforts to protect neighborhoods or preserve historic properties. White has sought to deflect perceptions he supports zoning or other broad-based land-use planning initiatives.

Hoagland, the consultant, said Houstonians for Responsible Growth includes bankers, architects, construction project managers and others concerned about the economic "ripple effects" of excessive regulation.

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