



PAUL LACHINE

PLANNING: Imposes huge costs on communities

Don't hobble Houston with planning

■ Freedom to adapt is our city's strength in competition for growth

By RANDAL O'TOOLE

HOUSTON is the freest major city in America, with no zoning and only moderate government intrusions into how property owners use their land. This freedom has made Houston the most affordable major city in America, with housing costs that are less than half of most other major urban areas. This freedom has also created an innovative and growth-friendly environment that is creating tens of thousands of new jobs each year.

Despite these benefits, the recent controversy over the Bissonnet/Ashby high rise has inspired local planning advocates to call for an increased amount of government planning of land in Houston.

Proposals have ranged from a "general plan" for the entire city "based on citizen vision, values, and goals" to a variety of ordinances that appear to be aimed at limiting dense developments.

Though planners may have the best of intentions, such planning is likely to lead to higher living costs, more traffic congestion and dramatically reduced job growth.

We can see this by looking at other cities with zoning and planning.

In a sense, American cities have engaged in a controlled experiment with planning, with Houston and a few other cities doing very little, many other cities doing some planning and some cities doing highly restrictive planning.

Advocates of planning say that it will make cities more livable, but the results of many experiments across the country show just the opposite.

Cities with strong planning authority, such as Portland, Ore., and San Jose, Calif., almost invariably have the least affordable housing, the fastest growing traffic congestion and growing taxes and/or declining urban services. In the long run, these problems tend to suppress urban growth and job creation.

The national real estate firm Coldwell Banker reports that, in 2007, a Houston

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family could buy a four-bedroom, two-and-one-half bath, 2,200-square foot home for \$170,000. The same house would cost more than twice that much in Portland and more than eight times as much in San Jose.

Such huge variations in the cost of housing from city to city did not exist 50 years ago. Today, they are mainly due to artificial housing shortages created by heavy regulations and land-use planning.

Planning also imposes huge costs on businesses. The same land shortages that drive up housing costs also increase the costs of retail, commercial and industrial developments. Congestion increases the costs of delivering freight and other goods to and from businesses.

Government planning spins out of control when it attempts to be comprehensive, prescriptive and long term. Comprehensive planning attempts to account for all of the impacts of any government action.

Prescriptive planning attempts to control how private landowners use their land. Long-term planning attempts to look decades into the future. No one can really predict the future, so such plans do far more harm than good.

Instead of comprehensive, prescriptive, long-range planning, government agencies should limit themselves to the short-term plans needed to carry out their missions. Houston comes closer to this ideal than any other major American city.

Houston's lack of zoning and heavy

regulation have led to an evolving system of private covenants and deed restrictions that respond to changes in tastes and demand for housing. The Harris County Toll Road Authority builds roads in response to transportation needs as expressed by people's willingness to pay tolls.

Houston should not attempt to write a comprehensive land-use plan or try to control or limit land uses in a misguided effort to improve livability by controlling where or how residents live. To preserve Houston's livability, affordability and growth-friendly environment, Houston should focus on maintaining a responsive government that provides the services people need, not one that is merely carrying out the latest planning fads.

Higher taxes and more government regulation also make heavily planned cities less growth-friendly.

The result is that growth once attracted to places like California and Massachusetts is now attracted to less heavily planned states like Georgia and Texas. Between 2000 and 2006, California's population grew by 7 percent — mostly foreign immigration — while Georgia and Texas populations grew by 12 to 14 percent.

As Harvard economist Edward Glaeser observes, "places with rapid [housing] price increases over one five-year period are more likely to have income and employment declines over the next five-year period" because the rules that drive up housing prices also drive away employers.

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