
EDITORIAL

The right direction

City needs proposed ordinance to regulate high-rise development in densely populated areas.

IN Houston, apparently, it takes an urban village, whose influential residents are outraged by a planned residential tower, to get curbs on unrestrained land development at City Hall. It's about time.

The neighborhood protests over the planned Ashby Street high-rise on Bissonnet Boulevard has motivated the administration of Mayor Bill White to place on a fast track an ordinance that could whittle the proposed 23-story building — and others like it — down to size. Citing public safety concerns, the law would require developers who build projects with more than 100 units abutting streets with two-lane, two-way traffic to submit a traffic impact analysis to the city.

As with other innovative ordinances passed during his four-year tenure, such as red light cameras and Safe Clear, Mayor White is invoking the city's authority to regulate in the interests of public safety. According to the ordinance's language, "certain types of high-density development have a significant probability of creating an adverse traffic impact on the established and nearby areas of the city affected by such development." It cites increased congestion, vehicle-pedestrian accidents resulting in injury or death, and impediments to fire, ambulance and police access to areas during emergencies.

If the public works director determines that the development would excessively impact traffic in the area, city officials could force the builder to make whatever design changes are necessary to bring the project into compliance. According to White, the Ashby high-rise "exposed a loophole" in the city's ability to control residential construction that has negative fallout for traffic and public safety in an area.

The ordinance is one more sign that city government is taking quality of life far more seriously than it did in the past. This year City Council has passed legislation to establish the first historic preservation district and to make developers responsible for contributing to the acquisition of parks in ar-

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reas where they build.

Company officials seeking to build the Bissonnet project charge that the ordinance is aimed at them, and that is undoubtedly true. By pushing ahead with a plan that would severely affect affluent neighborhoods in the area, they stirred up a hornet's nest of residents with the clout and connections to make their protests heard at City Hall.

If the dispute results in the crafting of sensible land-use regulations that will apply to everyone in the future, then all Houston communities will benefit. In protecting their own neighborhoods, the Ashby Street protesters have done us all a big favor.