

HIGH-RISE: Neighborhood leaders glad

White still hopes to stop project

■ The developers of high-rise agree to wait while city reviews the rules

By **MIKE SNYDER**
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Despite the City Council's three-month delay of an ordinance prompted by a proposed high-rise building near Rice University, Mayor Bill White declared Wednesday that his determination to block the project has not wavered.

White said his message to the developers of the project at 1717 Bissonnet was clear: "You'd better stop this thing, because I'm going to stop it unless you stop it." The comment drew cheers and applause from residents of adjoining neighborhoods who packed the council chamber Wednesday.

The council postponed voting on the ordinance after the developers, Matthew Morgan and Kevin Kirton of Buckhead Investment Partners, agreed in writing not to seek any additional permits during the 90-day delay.

Morgan and Kirton said their agreement to halt the project for 90 days was prompted in part by concerns expressed by other developers.

"We believe we have an obligation to other developers in this city, as more and more ad hoc rules continue to be proposed for the development of private property," Morgan said. "We were willing to make this short-term sacrifice for the good of the industry and the community."

The mayor said he had initially put the ordinance on a fast track — it was drafted and placed on the council agenda within a few weeks — because the developers in-

sisted on moving their project forward despite concerns about its impact on traffic. Their agreement to wait, White said, allows time to review parts of the ordinance needing more work.

Morgan and Kirton said Wednesday that other developers had expressed concern about the potential impact of the ordinance on projects they were planning. These concerns were the subject of a meeting White held with several developers and builders last week.

Jeff Gray, president and founder of Grayco Partners, a multi-family development firm, said the Bissonnet project and its reaction at City Hall had generated considerable discussion among some of his industry colleagues. Some developers were concerned that the ordinance gave too much authority to the public works director to require changes in projects, he said.

"If there's going to be a new standard, they just don't want it to be arbitrary and left to the discretion of a city department head," Gray said.

More traffic, he said, is an inevitable consequence of increasing density inside Loop 610, and the city and the development industry should work together to find solutions.

"Nobody wants to see an ordinance or a law passed or a new standard created that has unintended consequences," Gray said. "People would hope in 90 days the issue gets looked at comprehensively and something comes out of it better than a knee-jerk reaction."

Morgan and Kirton said they were disappointed by White's determination to stop their project.

"We're a little confused about what he wants," Morgan said. "We look forward to the rules being defined so that we can meet them."

Three issues to consider

City officials, meanwhile, will work on three elements that White said need to be addressed more carefully in the ordinance, which would empower the public works director to require changes in certain high-density developments that would increase traffic congestion.

White said city officials would review how to consider a building's proximity to a major thoroughfare in estimating its traffic impact, the standards for determining how much traffic volumes adjoining streets can accommodate, and whether the ordinance should also apply to office buildings.

The mayor said, however, he doesn't expect any changes in the measure to make it possible for Morgan and Kirton to build what they have proposed. Their plans call for a 23-story, mixed-use building at Bissonnet and Ashby — both two-lane, two-way streets that already carry heavy traffic.

"I don't think there's anything that would allow over 2,000 estimated trips a day, by their own admission, from a 1.6-acre site on an already congested residential street," White said.

Neighborhood leaders said they were gratified that the mayor had reinforced his determination to block the project. But they were concerned about what might happen during a 90-day delay.

Leaders of other neighborhoods with concerns about negative effects of proposed developments might try to get their issues included in the ordinance, making its impact so broad that it becomes politically untouchable, said Chris Amandes, an attorney who chairs a task force of leaders of the Southampton and Boulevard Oaks neighborhoods adjoining the project site.

Chronicle reporter Nancy Sarnoff contributed to this article.

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