

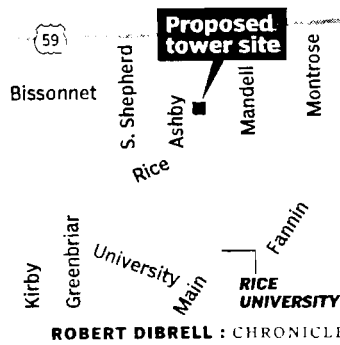
Mayor adds voice to those fighting high-rise near Rice

■ He says the city is working on a tougher ordinance for future projects

By MIKE SNYDER
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

The city of Houston will use "any appropriate power under law" to alter a planned 23-story building that would tower over single-family homes in neighborhoods near Rice University, Mayor Bill White said Wednesday.

White, in a letter to leaders of area civic clubs, said the project at 1717 Bissonnet would worsen traffic congestion on that two-lane street. For future projects, he said,



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city officials are working on an ordinance that would require developers to "reasonably address traffic impacts" in surrounding neighborhoods.

Neighborhood protection advocates said they hoped the mayor's comments, coupled with fierce opposition from the adjoining Southampton and

Boulevard Oaks neighborhoods, would provide impetus for stronger policies to ease the impact of new developments often seen as out of scale with surrounding single-family enclaves.

City Controller Annise Parker, who previously served on the City Council and has a longtime interest in neighborhood issues, likened the city's role in regulating development to its recent strengthening of its smoking ordinance.

"There is a strong reluctance on the part of many in the community to infringe on property rights," she said. "But that tower in the middle of Southampton is going to influence every building around it, just like someone who lights

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PLANS: Developers intend to proceed

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a cigarette in a restaurant has an impact on the people around him."

Councilwoman Anne Clutterbuck, whose district includes the Bissonnet site as well as two other recent controversial development projects, said such disputes have become so widespread that trying to solve them individually is impractical.

"We need to look at these more comprehensively and collectively," Clutterbuck said. "It's unfortunate that we're doing them piecemeal."

Clutterbuck said she had asked White's administration to thoroughly review city ordinances to look for any regulations that might give the city leverage to require changes in the Bissonnet project.

The developers, Kevin Kirton and Matthew Morgan of Houston-based Buckhead Investment Partners, said Wednesday that they are open to discussions with city officials

but intend to proceed with the project as planned. The development would include high-end apartments, shops, a restaurant and a five-story parking garage.

"We have invested an enormous amount of human and financial resources," Morgan said. "We studied all the available options."

Increased traffic

Neighborhood leaders said the project, on the site of what is now a small apartment development, would pour hundreds of vehicles every day onto Bissonnet and Ashby, also a two-lane street. In addition, the building would block the sun from nearby homes and intrude on residents' privacy, they said.

James Reeder, an attorney who lives nearby and is leading the opposition, pointed Wednesday to a garden at a home across Bissonnet from the site.

"There will be a shadow on their property every hour of ev-

ery day, all year long," he said.

The developers have said that a traffic study they commissioned showed minimal impact on the surrounding area.

Andy Icken, a deputy director of the Public Works and Engineering Department, said he had briefly reviewed the traffic study but hadn't yet analyzed its methodology or accuracy.

He acknowledged that the city now has no authority to require changes in any project based on the findings of a traffic study, noting that the ordinance being developed would create such authority.

"I think we'll start off with the power of persuasion," Icken said. "We're going to assume that reason will prevail here."

Working with developers

White said city officials often are successful when they work with developers to resolve traffic impact and other issues.

"Most developers want to have good relationships with

City Hall, and they realize there are consequences to being unpopular," White said.

In his letter, however, the mayor acknowledged that new, denser development in central Houston requires policy solutions as well as negotiation.

"Houston's city charter prevents the city from dictating references to landowners concerning the residential or commercial use" of their property, White said.

"I believe the city does have the power to limit or to impose reasonable requirements concerning on-site parking, flood impacts, the amount of traffic or trips and the reasonableness of places for ingress and egress on a particular property."

The developers say they plan to start construction next year and achieve full occupancy of 226 apartments by 2010.

Staff writer Matt Stiles contributed to this report.

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