

CITY & STATE



RICK CASEY

Great news: Developers form PAC

Great news!
Houston's major developers are organizing a political action committee to influence City Hall!

As my colleague Mike Snyder reports, it bears the typically generic, feel-good name "Houstonians for Responsible Growth," and it's backed by some of the city's biggest builders.

Why is this good news, you ask?

Because it's a historic development for developers and builders to have to lobby City Hall.

It means they no longer own it.

Houston was founded by real estate developers. The city has, with few exceptions, elected mayors who were either very pro-developer or who were developers.

Good, bad and ugly

Mayors such as Bob Lanier, Jim McConn, Oscar Holcombe and Roy Hofheinz.

With Sun Belt sensibilities, they kept regulations and development costs to a minimum, even warding off pressures to join the vast majority of American cities with a zoning system.

They sometimes subsidized development by getting government to build major roads into sparsely-populated areas.

The result has been housing costs that are among the lowest in any large American city. What's more, some of the best developers have produced beautiful neighborhoods, from centrally located River Oaks and parts of Montrose and the Heights to model suburbs such as The Woodlands.

The result has also been frequent flooding, clogged streets and freeways, gas-guzzling sprawl, large stretches that promote a national reputation for ugliness, and rapacious gentrification that in many cases has infected historic Victorian and craftsman neighborhoods with looming, poorly designed and built condominiums.

No 'no-growth mayor'

So what has happened that makes the developers worry?

It isn't a crusading mayor.

Bill White does have green credentials. He served for years on the board of Environmental Defense, a national group that seeks market solutions for environmental problems.

Solving traffic problems and cutting air pollution were high on his agenda from the beginning. But not taking on Houston's developers with a broad array of planning initiatives and building restrictions.

He has also shown himself willing to listen to citizen groups, as he did recently in delaying a billboard ordinance after organized groups vocally objected.

But with ambitions for higher office, the last thing he wants is some of the city's wealthy and politically savvy business leaders painting him as a "no-growth mayor."

The major change is not the man at City Hall. It's the people

Please see **CASEY**, Page B6

CASEY: Neighborhoods get organized, noticed

CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1
in the neighborhoods.

Houston's political landscape is being transformed by adding a sophisticated urban core. Affluent people with urban sensibilities have been filling the neighborhoods inside Loop 610, an area that had been slowly emptying since 1960.

Many of these people, young professionals and baby-boom couples and families in between, came from other cities and have urban sensibilities that reach farther than their lawns. They are comfortable with laws and regulations that protect them from their neighbors — and their neighbors from them.

"People are buying nice homes," said Rice University political scientist Bob Stein. "They want to buy nice views."

Developers fight back

So groups in the Heights organize to fight condo builders.

Groups in the Third Ward organize to fight gentrification.

And the entire neighborhood near Rice University organizes to oppose the proposed 23-story Ashby apartment tower.

Others organize to fight billboards, or to block the demolition of historic buildings. TMO has organized to bolster both regulations and funding to fight flooding.

These groups have learned how to put pressure on their elected officials.

That the developers feel the need to organize against them is a sign of their growing power.

I'm not worried about the developers. They have too much

savvy, power and money to be steamrolled at City Hall.

Compromises important

Houston will never be Portland.

And Austin and Houston have already shown what happens if Texas cities get tough with developers.

The developers get legislators from other cities to help them push through legislation overruling the offenders.

Still, if citizen groups maintain the energy to organize and good leadership at City Hall brings the various groups to the table, compromises can be hammered out to make Houston a better, more workable city.

■ **Corrections:** In Friday's column about District Attorney Chuck Rosenthal, I made several errors. The level of offense when a public servant uses government equipment for his own benefit depends not on the value of the equipment, but on the value of the use of the equipment. So Rosenthal, who sent out e-mails to his staff announcing his fundraiser, might be well-served if not too many staffers bought 20 tickets, as one said she did.

Dr. Sam Siegler's quotes came from Channel 11, not Channel 13. Most importantly, Siegler did not send a racist e-mail to Rosenthal; Rosenthal sent it to him. My apologies to Dr. Siegler.

You can write to Rick Casey at P.O. Box 4260, Houston, TX 77210, or e-mail him at rick.casey@chron.com.