

Developers preparing for post-White era

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■ Business leaders fear city is losing its favorable regulatory climate

By MIKE SNYDER
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Two of the most popular politicians in modern Houston history broke bread together last week and debated how much the city's future should resemble its past.

Over lunch with Mayor Bill White on Monday, former Mayor Bob Lanier laid out his concerns that new regulations on real estate development threaten the city's favorable business climate and low housing prices. White insisted his administration is simply taking modest steps in response to changing local development patterns.

As the two men chatted over their meals, real estate interests backed by Lanier were working behind the scenes to push back against perceived threats to Houston's unconstrained growth model — by persuading local officials or electing new ones.

"Occasionally, we need to remind ourselves that our favorable regulatory environment is worth keeping," said Kendall Miller, a shopping-center owner and one of the organizers of Houstonians for Responsible Growth.

Last week, the organization registered its political action committee with the Texas Ethics Commission, empowering it to spend money on local or state campaigns.

It previously had raised about \$800,000 for organizational costs but hasn't started serious political fundraising yet, said Ken Hoagland, a consultant working with the group.

With the support of Lanier, construction executive Leo Linbeck Jr. and other influential business leaders, the group is distributing literature and bringing in speakers to spread its message that government land-use planning is an exercise in folly.

DEVELOP: Neighborhoods seek protection from builders

Its leaders are horrified by visions of a Houston where a bloated planning bureaucracy raises development costs so much that middle-class families can't afford to buy a house.

But neighborhood groups and others pushing for more regulation are similarly horrified by their vision of a city where unfettered development strangles quiet neighborhoods with traffic congestion, obliterates historic properties and green space and aggravates flooding.

Both sides need to calm down a bit, White said last week.

As central Houston grows denser, the mayor said, it's not surprising to see increased tension between neighborhood and development interests.

"We try to strike a fair balance in this administration," White said.

"We need to strive for the right mix of continuity and change."

2 men, different eras

The mayor's lunch with Lanier was at La Griglia in what's left of the historic River Oaks Shopping Center, part of which was recently demolished to make way for larger new shops.

It was perhaps a fitting place for a meeting between two men who came to power in very different eras.

Before serving three mayoral terms in the 1990s, Lanier, 82, was a developer, lawyer and banker. He prospered as a player in a Houston business establishment that believed local government served its residents best by staying out of the way of growth and development.

White, 53, also an attorney with a business background, has campaigned and governed at a time when neighborhood protection and quality-of-life issues were far higher on the civic agenda.

White, however, is starting his final two-year term, and the new organization's political action committee will focus on the city elections of 2009.

"I think they're worried about what happens when

White's gone," said Jon Taylor, a political science professor at the University of St. Thomas. "Who is the establishment candidate for '09?"

Taylor and Richard Murray, a University of Houston political scientist, noted that two officials considering running for mayor in 2009 are Councilman Peter Brown and City Controller Annise Parker. Both are strong neighborhood advocates who might go further than White in limiting the impact of new development on established communities.

The effect of the organization's campaign on White's political fortunes is unclear. The mayor says he is focusing on his final term at City Hall, but many observers believe he is preparing to run for governor or the U.S. Senate.

Even without the development controversy, Murray said, most leaders of Houstonians for Responsible Growth are conservative Republicans unlikely to support White, a former state Democratic Party chairman, in a partisan campaign for governor or the Senate. City elections are officially nonpartisan.

But White could pay a political price for a continued public disagreement with Lanier, Taylor said.

"Bill White has got to be careful, going up against a guy who's just as popular as he is," Taylor said.

White said the two men's meeting was cordial, and he suggested that Lanier and others are pushing back against some ideas his administration isn't supporting.

Lanier, in an interview, cited a list of "about 19 ordinances in some stage of development" at City Hall that involved new rules or requirements for developers. The list, provided to the Chronicle by the group, includes some items that are neither existing nor proposed city laws.

The issue of most immediate interest is a proposed ordinance that would require developers of certain high-density projects near residential neighborhoods to take steps to ease traffic congestion. The ordinance, expected to be considered by the City Council in early February, was prompted by an outcry from neighborhoods near a planned 23-story mixed-use building near Rice University.

Using book to spread word

Though city officials are still working on details, they have identified only one project — the planned high-rise at 1717 Bissonnet — to which the measure would apply in its current form.

At least three members of Houstonians for Responsible Growth serve on a "stakeholders committee" that meets regularly with city officials to work on the high-density development ordinance.

To promote its message, the group has provided White and

every council member with copy of a book by Ranc O'Toole, a senior fellow with the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute, that argues against government land-use planning. It is arranged for an author with similar views, Wendell Cox, to visit Houston and meet with council members this week.

to protect neighborhoods from problems associated with new development.

"Why do we persist in adding more patches to the patches on this regulatory crazy quilt?" Sheila Sorvari, leader of a group called Save the Bungalows, wrote in an opinion piece for the Chronicle. "Why can't Houston act like a grown-up city and do something comprehensive, decisive and future oriented?"

In a document titled "Planning and Houston's Future," also distributed to council members, O'Toole praises Houston as "the freest major city in America, with no zoning and only moderate government intrusions into how property owners use their land." In an interview, O'Toole said he agreed with leaders of Houstonians for Responsible Growth that recent local policies threaten this system.

In his book and other writings, O'Toole has likened municipal land-use planning to the work of central planners in communist regimes such as the former Soviet Union. One chapter in his new book is entitled "The Ideal Communist City."

"The point that I'm trying to make is not that American planners are communists, but I'm saying that communist leaders are planners," O'Toole said. "Communism would have worked a lot better if they hadn't turned it over to their central planners."

Neighborhood advocates are responding, writing on blogs and in other forums that the city should be doing more, not less,

Would zoning pass today?

In a blog on the Gulf Coast Institute's Web site, the group's president, David Crossley, dismissed O'Toole and Cox as writers who "drive the road and sprawl agenda."

He noted that surveys show most Houstonians support stronger planning.

Murray, the UH political scientist, said he believes a referendum on zoning — the last such election failed in 1993 — would pass in Houston today.

The emergence of Houstonians for Responsible Growth, Murray said, may indicate developers realize they can no longer assume, as they did during Lanier's era, that their views will prevail at City Hall.

"The middle-class reaction against unfettered development is pretty strong," Murray said. "These guys (developers) aren't going to have the playing field to themselves any more."

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