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Ordinance, not high-rise, side-tracked

By MICHAEL REED
mreed@hcnonline.com

The decision to delay an ordinance intended to stall a proposed high-rise was easier to read on the faces of those attending last week's Houston City Council meeting than it would ever be in the minutes recorded at the session.

As many as 100 residents of Southampton and Boulevard Oaks attended the meeting. But many left wearing sullen expressions before the near-unanimous vote to postpone adopting guidelines that would have set limits on density and number of units of future high-rises.

HIGH-RISE

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During the public comments segment, Chris Amande, a leader of the two communities' efforts, made it apparent to those who did not already know that their battle might not be nearing its completion.

"We are disappointed this may be delayed," he told council.

It soon became apparent that Amande could have omitted the word "may" from his statement, when it was announced the developers, Buckhead Investment Partners, had agreed in writing not to seek additional permits for the next 90 days as part of an agreement with the city.

The Public Works Department had already barred the issuance of permits for the 23-story project at 1717 Bissonnet Street, pending study of "further traffic implications."

During the next three months,

the city will meet with representatives of the development community in an effort to draft an ordinance that, according to the Buckhead letter, will have "long-term viability without unintended consequences."

Prior to casting the lone dissenting vote, Councilwoman Anne Clutterbuck of Southampton said "I understand the development community needs predictable rules," but added, "It is a privilege to be able to build in an unzoned city."

Mayor Bill White said the ordinance needed more work concerning the way traffic would be measured and that guidelines on proximity of projects to major thoroughfares were needed.

White said his message to the developers remained, "You'd better stop this thing, because I'm going to stop it unless you stop it."

His remarks were greeted with enthusiastic applause.

Earlier, neighborhood resident Sue Lawson said she was "very upset," pleading, "Whatever is wrong with the ordinance, please fix it."

Ron Kahanek, president of the Boulevard Oaks Civic Association, told the council he believed the ordinance was correctly written narrowly as a cautious first step.

"It isn't supposed to address all the issues," he said.

White said in addition to perhaps being too narrow, he felt a proposed project's proximity to thoroughfares and its effect on neighborhood cut-through traffic needed to be considered. He also wanted a "rule of thumb" to predict the outcome of the permitting process.

"We may want a formula plus a variance procedure," he said.

White suggested the groundwork for the 90-day ordinance drafting process be lead through the Regulations Committee, which is chaired by Toni Lawrence of District A.