

Reporting from the picket line

'60s feel, uppercrust look to protest along Bissonnet

West University Examiner, October 10, 2007

By ERIKA McDONALD
emcdonald@hcnonline.com

"This is really different. It's like the establishment taking on the establishment."

Steve Katzman, Southampton resident

Most protesters who take to Houston's streets in dissent don't do so in a three-piece suits.

But not all of the doctors, lawyers, City Council members and other professionals who oppose the planned high-rise in the 1700 block of Bissonnet Street had time to make it home from work to paint their signs and change clothes.

From business suits to tie-dyed shirts and even elaborate costumes, Southampton and Boulevard Oaks residents who shrugged off their bourgeois image at last week's protest say their cause is one that affects the entire city.

"Look around, this is the upper crust," Southampton resident Steve Katzman said, pointing out such prominent pickets as City Councilwoman Anne Clutterbuck.

Having spent his college days in Berkeley, Calif., Katzman is no stranger to dissent. In those days, he said, there was hardly a time when he wasn't protesting something. But Katzman admits he's never seen anything like the high-rise demonstration.

"This is really different," he said. "It's like the establishment taking on the establishment."

Katzman did not have to look all the way back to Berkeley to recall his most recent protest. Just last year, he took to the streets after rumors swirled about the possible demolition of the River Oaks Theater. "I got my picture in the paper then,

too," he said.

Demonstrators Frank and Jeannette Stokes live on Wroxton Street, just one block from where the highrise would be erected. Jeannette is slightly more passionate about the issue than her husband.

"My wife dragged me to this," Frank Stokes said, explaining that he had not attended a protest since the 1960s.

For her part, Jeanette Stokes has been more active. In the '80s she and other neighborhood moms demonstrated against the opening of a Rick's Cabaret just off Greenbriar Street at the Southwest Freeway. The neighborhood prevailed and the strip club never opened there.

Stokes said she thinks all Houston neighborhoods should be protected from unwanted develop-

ment, but worries that most people around town view the tower battle as a case of rich folks protecting their own interests.

"Not everyone who lives here is rich," Stokes said. She, a retired teacher, and her husband, a retired civil servant, bought their home in 1972.

Stokes said she understands the need for affordable, multifamily residences in the neighborhood so that more people can experience suburban comforts inside the 610 Loop. "We're not so selfish that we don't want anyone to build here," she said. "But it's 23 stories!"

Other cool-headed protesters agreed it is the size of the structure and not any discrimination against renters that ignited their opposition.

Chelsea Dreyer, a young professional who moved to a home on North Boulevard three years ago said she came to the protest to get more information, because she

was still "on the fence."

"It definitely doesn't fit with the neighborhoods," Dreyer said. "But there are no restrictions there and these two guys saw a business opportunity that is completely legal."

But the majority of protesters were not so empathetic.

"Morgan and Kirton sleep with the devil," Southampton resident Joe Fisher said, referring to the developers of the project. His sign said so, too.

Dressed in a Grim Reaper's cloak, pitchfork, red devil's mask and an inexplicable pair of ape-paw gloves, this Reaper-meets-Kong riled the crowd by leading cheers such as, "Skyscraper, heart-breaker."

Others tried a less-threatening tack, enlisting the help of their children to express simple messages like the Golden Rule.

Elaine Mut of Milford Street said when she told her two Poe El-

ementary first-graders about the tower they suggested developers Kirton and Morgan might not like such a structure being built next to their houses.

"We are trying to teach them not only to cherish their community and stand up for it when it's threatened, but also, that just because something is legal doesn't make it right," Mut said.

Every protester the Examiner spoke with said they believe the tower battle holds implications for Houstonians beyond Southampton and Boulevard Oaks. The high-rise issue seems to be quickly becoming the latest flashpoint in a larger conversation about zoning in the city of Houston.

Whatever happens in the high-rise fight, Katzman may want to take a break from neighborhood activism: "People are going to start to think this is all I do," he joked.

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Photo by ERIKA MCDONALD/The Examiner
One of many signs of discontent near the proposed development.



A placard-holding resident of the area voices her disapproval from curbside.

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