

## Behind the Headlines...



# Is Ashby Highrise on Long-Term Hold?

By Sarah Kortemeier

Houston Mayor Bill White plans to ask Buckhead Investment Partners, the developers behind the Ashby high-rise project at 1717 Bissonnet, to delay the project for several months as the city weighs a new high-density traffic impact ordinance.

The ordinance, which would require traffic impact analysis and mitigation for certain real estate development projects, has already been delayed for three and a half months. Houston City Council agreed to delay the process by two more weeks on Wednesday. The Buckhead developers will not file for building permits during that time.

In a press conference after the Council meeting, however, Mayor White told reporters that he hoped to gather more public input before putting the ordinance to a Council vote.

“The Mayor would prefer to have time to have a more lengthy, thoughtful process and input from the community. If we hold public hearings ... we can give everyone a chance to have their say,” said Frank Michel, the mayor’s communications director. “We’re hoping for a clear, consistent ordinance that will balance between the competing interests.” In an ideal situation, Michel said, the ordinance could be revised and voted on by the end of the summer.

If the Buckhead developers do not agree to halt the permit process for that period of time, Michel said, the mayor believes that the city has the authority to stop the Ashby project under section 40-86 of the City Code of Ordinances. That section deals with “curb cuts” and driveways. The ordinance allows the city engineer to refuse driveway permits for a project if he or she finds that the driveway “would create an extraordinary traffic hazard or would excessively interfere with the normal use of the street right-of-way.”

Michel said that if the Buckhead

developers do not agree to hold off on permitting, the mayor might bring the current ordinance back in order to stop the project. The mayor has voiced strong opposition to the Ashby high-rise project in the past.

The mayor’s proposal for a delay came as a surprise to the Southampton community, which is located next door to the proposed high-rise at 1717 Bissonnet. “The mayor’s apparent intention to seek an extended delay of the high density ordinance was not expected by the task force, and it is inconsistent with numerous recent statements made to us by city representatives about the path forward for the ordinance process,” reads a statement released Thursday by the Stop Ashby High Rise Task Force.

Southampton residents remain confident that the mayor joins them in opposition to the Ashby project, however. “We have no reason to believe that anyone from the City is acting in bad faith ... We appreciate that drafting a quality ordinance takes time and input from many sources,” representatives from the task force said.

The task force met with Buckhead representatives on Feb. 5 to discuss alternative building solutions for the site. In that meeting, company representatives indicated that Buckhead Investment Partners would be willing to reduce the size of the structure to 19 stories by building bigger and fewer condominium units, but the company reserved the right to build as many units as originally proposed if the larger units didn’t sell.

In addition, company representatives told the task force that if Buckhead Investment Partners received a cash payout of \$2.65 million, the company would build a six-story structure on the site, consisting of two stories of parking space and four of apartments.