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# City proposes more rules for homebuilding

Wheelchair ramps would replace stairs; builders unhappy

**Austin Business Journal - by [Jean Kwon](#) ABJ Staff**

**Austin city officials have proposed an ordinance that would require all new single-family homes to have features such as wheelchair ramps so they're more accessible to disabled individuals and the elderly.**

The City Council this month passed a resolution to initiate code amendments requiring new homes to comply with the city's so-called visitability standards, which currently apply only to homes built using public funds.

**The city's law department is currently drafting an ordinance for public hearings and a City Council vote next month.**

Stakeholders involved in the process include the Home Builders Association of Greater Austin, disability advocacy group ADAPT, the American Institute of Architects, the Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities and the city's building, fire code and electric boards.

Visitability began as a grassroots movement in the late 1980s to change home construction practices so that many homes can be lived in or visited by individuals who have trouble with steps.

The idea behind the movement -- which has been adopted by many cities, primarily for publicly funded homes -- is to design homes to maximize mobility, particularly as baby boomers age and eschew nursing homes. There are more than 54 million Americans with disabilities, and the aging population is expected to reach 70 million by 2030, says James Williams Jr., president and CEO of Easter Seals, a Chicago-based disability advocacy group.

"As we age and/or become disabled, these are things that most of us or our families will need," says **City Council Member Betty Dunkerley**, who proposed the ordinance. "This effort is an attempt to include [features] that are relatively low-cost now but represent much higher costs later."

**Under the proposed ordinance, builders would be required to include at least one building entrance on the first floor served by a ramp or no-step entrance. Doors must be at least 32 inches wide, and hallways must be at least 36 inches across and level with door thresholds. Builders would be required to put a bathroom on the first floor, which must have reinforced walls capable**

**of supporting grab bars. There would be a slew of mandated design features, such as placement of light switches, electrical outlets and lever door handles.**

Leon Barba, assistant director of the city's Watershed Protection and Development Review Department, says that it's difficult to estimate added costs, and that they will vary widely from minimal to major, depending on the type of lot and quality of features.

But given that such a small sliver of the population needs visitability features, the costs are not worth the investment, says Harry Savio, the executive vice president of the Home Builders Association.

**Savio cites disability statistics from the University of California, which say only 2.6 percent of the U.S. population uses any kind of mobility device, such as a wheelchair, scooter, cane or walker. Less than 1 percent of the population requires a wheelchair, says Savio.**

According to Savio, 2 percent of homes built by five of the largest local builders in the last two years had requests for visitability features.

Savio says he estimates the visitability standards will add, on average, \$1,500 per home. The smallest homes will be impacted most because a feature like larger doors triggers proportional increases in size throughout a home, says Savio.

"We looked at plans, and [increasing door size] was going to add 500 square feet. At \$1,000 a square foot, you just increased the cost of the home by \$5,000. No one talks about that."

There were about 5,100 single-family homes built in the Austin area last year, Savio says, and many homebuilders and buyers are already complaining about rising home prices. The median sales price for Central Texas homes increased 5 percent in the last year to \$186,680, according to the Austin Board of Realtors.

Just in the last year, the city passed water conservation and energy conservation ordinances that have added costs and inspection time for builders. Currently on the table is a city ordinance that would require energy-efficiency retrofits at the point of sale; a task force will release recommendations next month.

**"You couldn't have introduced [the visitability ordinance] at a worse time," says Savio.**

**Courtesy of JB Goodwin**