

City to consider expanding rules restricting home sizes

South Austin residents say the rules would preserve the character of their neighborhoods.

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When the Austin City Council decided in 2006 to limit the sizes of new or renovated houses in the central city, council members said they wanted to preserve the character of older neighborhoods.

Now, residents of some South Austin neighborhoods say their communities have character worth saving, too.

Today, the Austin City Council will consider a resolution asking City Manager Marc Ott to work with South Austin residents to identify boundaries for a potential expansion of the city's Residential Design and Compatibility Standards ordinance, which limits the size, shape and location of dwellings on urban lots. The ordinance currently applies to about 50 neighborhoods bordered by Ben White Boulevard on the south, U.S. 183 on the north and east, and Capital of Texas Highway (Loop 360), Lake Austin and MoPac Boulevard (Loop 1) on the west.

Council Member Laura Morrison said she sponsored the resolution in response to the first-ever requests by residents outside the ordinance boundaries to be included in its regulations. "I'm certainly responding to people who are now saying, 'Let's have this discussion,'" Morrison said.

The resolution says that the Southwood Neighborhood Association and nearby residential areas south of Ben White Boulevard are facing increased pressure from new construction, redevelopment and additions to existing buildings. In October, Southwood voted to join the much smaller Red Bird Lane and Salem Walk Drive neighborhoods in asking the city to extend the ordinance's boundaries south of Ben White.

"We are simply asking for the same protection that Central Austin neighborhoods received with the McMansion ordinance," said Missy Bledsoe, president of the Southwood association.

Andrea McCartney, who lives on Red Bird Lane just south of Southwood, said she sought the association's support because the Red Bird Lane area doesn't have a neighborhood organization and because "there's strength in numbers."

For months, McCartney has been fighting a proposal by developers seeking a city zoning change allowing them to build duplexes or condos on a lot next door to her house, amid a small pocket of older homes set on half-acre lots. A number of adjacent property owners also signed a petition opposing the zoning change.

City staff has recommended approval of the change, which would allow the developer to proceed with plans to re-subdivide the property into two duplex lots, for a total of four units.

A hearing and third reading of a variance in the zoning case is scheduled for today's council meeting.

"This is a modest neighborhood. To build something that's two to three times bigger than the other houses is not really fitting with the character," McCartney said.

Even if the ordinance boundaries were extended, the rules limiting the size and height of homes would still allow the redevelopment, though it would be smaller, McCartney said.

"We're not against growth, but we'd like controlled growth," McCartney said, adding that extending the rules' boundaries would eliminate the need for residents to "go to the City Council every time something like this happens."

Bledsoe described Southwood's resolution as a show of support for Red Bird and Salem Walk area residents; large residential construction is not currently a problem in Southwood's collection of mostly small, 1950s tract homes. But Southwood felt it was time to be proactive, Bledsoe said, adding, "We know it's coming."

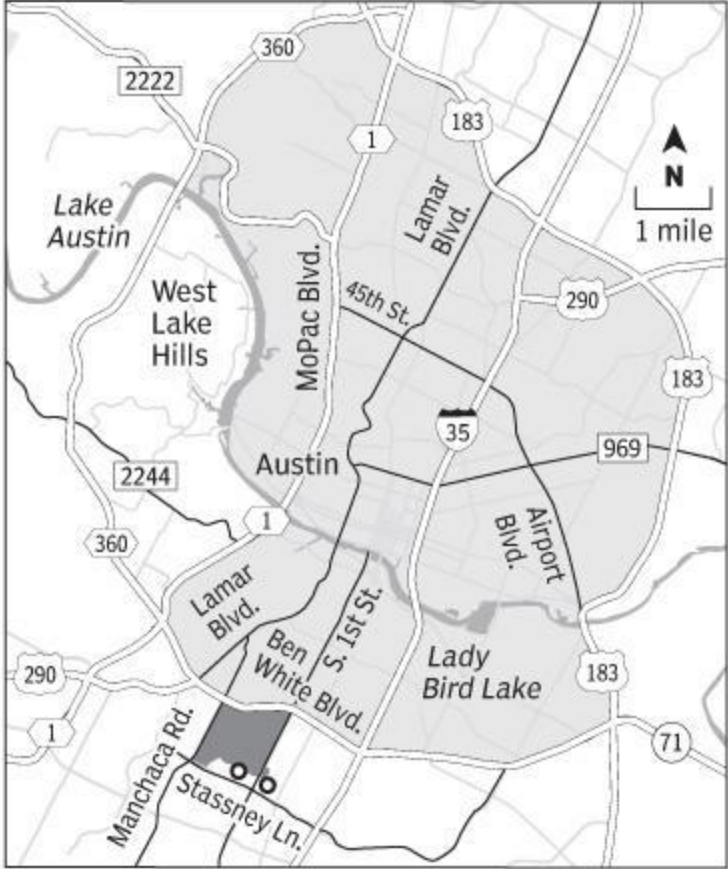
The ordinance stoked considerable controversy even as it was being written more than three years ago. A citizens task force that included neighborhood activists, homeowners, home builders and architects took four months to write the regulations. The rules became the city's response to a growing opposition to redevelopment among residents of Austin's oldest neighborhoods. Meeting a strong demand for inner-city homes, builders were tearing down one-story houses on modest lots and replacing them with much larger homes.

Some neighbors complained that the houses destroyed the character of their neighborhoods, even blocking sunlight from reaching the older homes. Builders said the larger homes fetched higher sale prices, which they needed to cover their high costs for desirable land in the central city. Critics of the rules said they would stifle inner-city development.

Harry Savio, executive vice president of the Home Builders Association of Greater Austin, said the current ordinance has been difficult to administer. "It's vague and difficult to understand," Savio said. "When something is such a challenge already, I guess the first question is, where are you going to get the resources to extend it?"

Morrison, who led the citizens task force, said the panel delicately weighed conflicting interests along with questions about where the regulations should apply. She said the panel set boundaries in the central city, recognizing that pressures for more development could one day extend outside those limits and that they might need to be extended.

City rules limit building on urban lots



- About 50 neighborhoods are currently covered by the city's rules
- Southwood Neighborhood Association seeks inclusion in ordinance
- Homes on or near Red Bird Lane and Salem Walk Drive seek inclusion

Sources: Southwood Neighborhood Association, City of Austin **Linda Scott**
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Courtesy of JB Goodwin