

Austin approves two 'visitability' requirements

Backers disappointed after City Council declines most of the recommended changes.

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The Austin City Council approved Wednesday a watered-down version of its "visitability" ordinance that aims to make all new homes and duplexes accessible for people with disabilities.

Only two requirements, a 30-inch clearance on one lower-level bathroom door and reinforced bathroom walls in that bathroom to allow for future installation of grab bars, remained when the council voted unanimously to approve the ordinance after a public hearing.

The draft ordinance originally included other rules, such as a zero-step entrance, height limits for light switches and outlets and the use of levered door handles instead of typical round or oval knobs.

But the proposal drew criticism from home builders who said the requirements would increase costs and hijack owners' rights to choose how they want their homes to look and feel.

Betty Dunkerley, who sponsored the rules, expressed dismay at not being able to pass all the rules but said she would work to develop a volunteer program to encourage more visitability in homes.

"My point is to try to get as much visitability as we can," Dunkerley said. "If we can't get it on a have-to basis, get it on a volunteer basis."

At the public hearing, Harry Savio, president of the Home Builders Association of Greater Austin, said his organization favored working on financial incentives and education for consumers to promote visitability in new homes.

The decision to go with only two requirements upset many of the more than two dozen people who attended the public hearing to lobby for more visitable housing. Many left Council Chambers, shaking their heads, before the council voted.

Stephanie Thomas, an organizer with the disability rights group ADAPT Texas, said the council caved to the home builders' concerns. She said opponents of the visitability requirements have exaggerated the costs and effects of the accessibility features.

"It seems like y'all have bought their line of baloney hook, line and sinker," Thomas said, addressing the council. "This isn't just people with disabilities. This is their families."

Many of those who testified before the council shared their personal stories about not being able to enter friends' or relatives' houses or having to go to the bathroom in bedrooms because doors to the bathroom were too narrow.

The new requirements go into effect Jan. 1.

The wider range of visitability rules have already been in place citywide for about a decade for houses built with government assistance. More than 3,000 such homes have been built.

Dunkerley, 72, said she noticed how inadequate housing standards are for people with disabilities or injuries that limit mobility when she broke her leg a few years ago.

According to the 2006 American Community Survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, about 68,000 of 717,000 people living in Austin are disabled, and more than 48,000 people are at least 65 years old.

The Wednesday meeting was Dunkerley's last on the council, but she encouraged council members to keep working on visitability after her retirement.

Courtesy of JB Goodwin