Plan's building blocks spark zoning concerns

Measure seeks pedestrian-friendly growth inside Loop 610

Amid election-season politics and opposition from the real estate industry, city officials are poised to debate a measure that would empower civic groups to set development guidelines for certain parts of Houston.

Planning officials hope the City Council will approve the "area plan" ordinance by the end of October. A draft was completed last month and the city planning commission is expected to review it over the next few weeks.

Supporters say the ordinance would help neighborhoods inside Loop 610 preserve their character while enhancing efforts to create pedestrian-focused environments with a dense, urban feel. But in a city where new rules for developers tend to be greeted with suspicion, the "Z-word" already is creeping into the discussion.

"Everybody is concerned that anything that's akin to zoning scares the living heck out of people in Houston," said Jim Box, a leader of local organizations representing developers and homebuilders. "The development community is extremely uneasy about it."

Box acknowledged that the ordinance is not a form of zoning because it would not dictate land uses. It may be hard to convince developers of that, however.

Although the ordinance is "well-intentioned," he said, it would impose new rules that could threaten Houston's reputation as a developer-friendly city. The absence of excessive regulations, he said, has helped make Houston's homes among the most affordable in the country.

"I think there will be significant opposition from the development community," said Box, president of the Greater Houston Builders Association and government liaison for the Houston Real Estate Council, a developers' group.

Under the area-plan concept, organizations such as manage-

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ment districts or community development corporations could tailor guidelines controlling such characteristics as lot size, the number of buildings within a set area, the distance buildings must be set back from the street and requirements for parking and open space.

Area plans covering mainly single-family residential neighborhoods could include requirements that developers use such features as landscaping, lighting, parking and signs to offset the negative effects of building non-single-family projects such as businesses or townhomes.

An area covered by a plan would have to have distinct economic characteristics and logical boundaries such as streets or streams.

Supporters say areas such as Midtown, where civic leaders are trying to encourage dense, pedestrian-focused development along the route of Metro's light rail line, are ideal candidates for area plans. In Midtown, that might call for wide sidewalks, parking lots tucked behind buildings and similar features consistent with civic leaders' goals for the area, they say.

"It's a way to encourage innovative development," said Ed Wuille, a shopping center developer who chairs the Main Street Coalition, which is overseeing plans to redevelop the Main Street corridor.

The proposal must undergo review by the Planning Commission before the council considers it. City Planning Director Bob Litke is scheduled to brief the commission on it Sept. 18.

Commission Chairman Marvin Katz said, however, that the distractions of city elections — with competitive races for mayor, controller and at least eight council seats — may make it difficult to get such a controversial measure passed.

"I know Bob (Litke) is real anxious to get this out before the year's end, but I question whether he's going to make it," Katz said.

Councilwoman Annie Parker said the ordinance could be approved this year if city officials can persuade developers' groups to support it.

Local government "is not going to stop over the next four months," she said, but the council would not be inclined to wade into a highly controversial issue during the campaign season.

Parker, who chairs the council's Quality of Life and Neighborhood Protection Committee, said the area-plan ordinance is consistent with past efforts to help Houstonians control conditions in their neighborhoods.

"Folks in the neighborhoods want to control their own destinies as much as possible," Parker said.

The ordinance originally was to affect the entire city, but this draft applies only to areas inside Loop 610, where city officials say population density is increasing and pedestrian-focused environments are being encouraged.

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Construction continues Monday at the Calais at Courtland Square Apartments in midtown Houston. The "area-plan" ordinance, which aims to help neighborhoods inside Loop 610 preserve their character, will be reviewed by the city's planning commission in coming weeks. However, concerns about zoning are already being voiced.