

The Debate Continues (posted to blog on 11/11/2008)

The debate on affordable housing debate in Fredericksburg, TX took two steps forward and a half steps back at last weeks Planning & Zoning hearing. On the agenda were proposed changes to several existing zoning ordinance classifications, the creation of a new one and the re-zoning of a neighbor to allow for small lots and more density.

Having apparently received enough critical feedback from neighbors duly notified of the impending discussions, P&Z wisely opted to separate the discussion on the zoning classification changes/creation and the re-zoning of the neighborhood for fear that, if considered as a package, the issue would go down in total defeat.

Their plan worked in that some significant changes to existing rules were amended and a new classification (R-1A) was approved by P&Z. These proposed changes/additions now move to the 12/1 City Council agenda for review, discussion and a vote.

The proposed re-zoning of the Walch Terrace neighborhood was roundly criticized by those potentially affected. Clearly seeing the writing on the wall, P&Z requested that city staff withdraw this proposal which, of course, they did. Score one for the neighborhood!

This agenda was devised by city staff, P&Z and (to some degree) City Council at the behest of the Affordable Housing Task Force as a means of taking a critical first step towards removing various regulations from the path of affordable development. The goal of these changes was to encourage “infill” housing into existing neighborhoods by encouraging lot division and increased building coverage.

While it is my personal opinion that these measures will make little difference in “available dirt” becoming more “affordable”, they do stand to increase density in the city core and perhaps minimally affect “suburbanization”.

These steps are progress in the long road to achieving the stated aim of these various committees, task forces, council's, etc. (to allow for more "affordable housing"). Each public official and task force member should be congratulated on the partial success of this effort. More has been accomplished in the last several months than has in the last dozen years.

More steps are needed, however, and it is my hope that collective wisdom involved in the process are not disheartened by the one "defeat" resultant from this meeting. It was a bad idea, poorly executed. You did the right thing by pulling it. Take your licks and keep on movin'.

Unless and until we define what "affordable" means to our community and realistically assess the true demand for this product, I don't see how we can craft future incentive packages to encourage real progress. Unless and until we are ready to recognize that the "waiver" of a fee not currently being collected cannot logically be termed as a "giveaway" and unless and until we realize that the potential expansion of the tax base far outweighs any incentives granted, unless and until we acknowledge that "affordability" does not end with the purchase price (but rather includes maintenance, sustainability, efficiency, utilities, taxes, etc.) how can we make further progress?