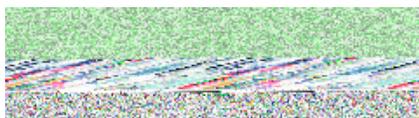


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# Should Castle Hill neighborhood be deemed a historic district?

*Some residents say designation, design rules would preserve historic character; others say it would infringe on property rights.*

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Castle Hill gets its name from a three-story brick structure on West 11th Street now known as 'the Castle.' It was built for the Texas Military Institute, which moved to Austin from Bastrop in 1870. Castle Hill's oldest homes vary in size and style and are mixed with apartment complexes.



Larry Kolvoord/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

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The owners of 58 percent of the land in the Castle Hill area support creating a local historic district. Phil Solomon isn't one of them. 'Apply to have your own house zoned historic if you want, but don't rezone mine against my will,' says Solomon, who owns two houses on Blanco Street.



Larry Kolvoord/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

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Ed Jordan lives in the West Seventh Street house where he grew up. 'I think it's a good idea to keep our home facades as pure to the neighborhood look as we can.'

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By **Sarah Coppola**

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Updated: 12:49 a.m. Tuesday, June 8, 2010  
Published: 10:36 p.m. Monday, June 7, 2010

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More than a century ago, state treasurer James Raymond bought a rural swath of West Austin and developed it for grand homes. Later landowners added Victorian houses and Craftsman bungalows on smaller lots, and more middle-class workers moved in, boarding a Sixth Street trolley line to get to jobs downtown.

Many of the old homes still stand, but this area — called Castle Hill for the brick tower that once housed the Texas Military Institute and that peers over the neighborhood — is facing redevelopment pressure as more people look to live near downtown.

To preserve Castle Hill's historical flavor, some residents there are asking the city to deem it a local historic district, which would require property owners to follow design rules and get city approval to change their homes' exteriors. It would also qualify them for tax breaks in some cases. Other Castle Hill homeowners oppose the zoning change, saying it would too tightly restrict what they can do with their land.

"It would be a down-zoning of our property," said Carlos Juarez, who owns a Blanco Street home. "If you want to rezone your property, fine. But this should not be forced on the whole neighborhood."

The city's Historic Landmark Commission will vote June 28 on whether to create the district; the City Council will consider it later. The proposal is the first big test of local historic district guidelines passed in 2004. Only one small district has formed since then: Harthan Street Local Historic District, near Castle Hill, has 10 properties.

The district proposed by Castle Hill property owners has 175 buildings on 39 acres roughly bounded by Baylor, Blanco, Sixth and 12th streets.

"It's an incremental zoning change that would provide protection to owners in these six square blocks and help retain the neighborhood's cohesive, increasingly rare historic character," said Laura Kelso, part of the team of homeowners that compiled the district application. The effort cost \$3,000, including a \$691 city application fee, she said.

Austin has 15 federally designated historic districts — one includes Castle Hill — but they are mostly symbolic. Local districts impose more rules but offer more shields against incongruous redevelopment. There are more than 2,500 local historic districts nationwide.

Not all district buildings must look alike or have historical merit; Castle Hill's oldest homes vary in size and style and are mixed with apartment complexes. Collectively, they tell a compelling story about the city's past, said Terri Myers, a historic preservation consultant who has researched the area.

Castle Hill "represents early suburban life in Austin — the first efforts to expand beyond the confines of the city limits," she said. "The homes also show the evolution of a neighborhood through periods of boom and bust. You see large Victorian houses next to small Craftsman bungalows."

Residents applying for a district suggest its boundaries. At least 51 percent of the buildings must be at least 50 years old and have enough original architectural features to retain a historical appearance. Owners of at least 51 percent of the land area must support creating the district, a standard the city lowered from 60 percent last year. City property, such as the century-old fire station on Blanco Street, can count.

Applicants must survey the exterior features of every district building and closely research the history and past owners of some of them. Castle Hill residents hired Myers to do some of that work. Myers sits on the city's landmark commission and will recuse herself from voting

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