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Downtown Mixed Use zoning praised in some neighborhoods

By Kimberly Reeves

Ted Siff of the **Austin Original Neighborhood Association** assured the **Planning Commission** last night that downtown mixed-use zoning had saved his neighborhood, not hurt it.

History has tended to teach the members of the Planning Commission that upzoning rarely wins downtown neighborhood support. **Judges Hill**, for instance, fought tooth and nail against zoning an existing single-family residence for office space, even if it meant minimal alterations to the property.

The Austin Original Neighborhood Association has a completely different strategy. Siff said it's been the neighborhood's willingness to upzone to DMU that has preserved the neighborhood. Otherwise, Siff suspected his house might be sitting in a sea of surface parking lots, which were all the rage in the late 1970s.

Instead, the neighborhood has lost only three properties since 1978.

Siff suggested the reason the neighborhood association was willing to accommodate DMU zoning was to recognize the elimination of mixed-use overlays of LO (limited office) and GO (general office) zoning upon residential properties, which went away in 1978. The only option now is DMU, which allows residential properties on high-priced downtown real estate to assume retail and office uses.

Downtown neighborhoods do see teardowns once properties are upzoned, especially along downtown's arterial corridors, but Siff's neighborhood is fairly intact. Yes, there's office and retail zoning, but it's done within existing homes.

"The jewel of this neighborhood is the fact that it's filled with homes that are both still residential and historic in nature," Siff said.

For the time being, that appears to be the goal of **John Horton III**, who owns the property at 904 San Antonio and the adjoining three lots. Those three lots, Horton said, are homes now occupied by two of Horton's sons and his office. All three lots carry DMU zoning. The property proposed for upzoning is intended to be prospective office space, Horton said.

"Several generations lived in this home," Horton told the commission. "I was raised as a child in this house, and I am seeking to convert it from MF-4 to a mix of uses, including commercial, residential, and retail."

The cost of converting a downtown property for high-density multifamily (MF-4) use no longer makes sense, given the value of the land underneath the homes, he said. The feasible alternative, Horton told the commission, would be to seek upzoning, which the proposed downtown neighborhood plan appears to support in preliminary documents.

The home at 904 San Antonio, as **Commissioner Mandy Dealey** was quick to note, remains the final residential property that fronts on any of the four historic downtown squares.

"I'm going to say what you already know," Commissioner Mandy Dealey told Horton about the home at 904 San Antonio. "You have a jewel here, the last single-family residence facing one of the original public squares in Austin, and that's rare."

"I'm aware of that," Horton acknowledged.

Horton's case had been delayed because of two questions that the commission wanted answered: How tall could a building on this site be if the existing home were removed and DMU zoning prevailed? (The calculation appeared to be between 78 and 92 feet in height, according to Planner **Clark Patterson**.) And would the owner be willing to submit to historical designation? (No.)

The owner, agent **Ron Thrower** said, was not willing to pursue a historic designation, but he also had no immediate plans to level the property. If at some point in the future the Hortons or future owners wanted to demolish or move the house on the property, it would certainly trigger a review by the **Historic Landmark Commission** as to whether it should bear landmark designation.

"It's more appropriate to deal with that at that time," Thrower said. "We'd like to move forward with the DMU zoning."

The Planning Commission did agree to recommend DMU zoning to Council on a vote of 6-0. In a side note, **Chair Dave Sullivan** asked whether the case had gone to the **Downtown Commission**. Dealey said it hadn't. Sullivan suggested the Planning Commission draft an opinion on the issue, making sure the Downtown Commission had its say in zoning cases.

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