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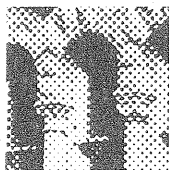
July 8, 2009

The Honorable Lee Leffingwell
 Mayor Pro Tem Martinez and Council Members
 City of Austin
 P.O. Box 1088
 Austin, TX 78768

Re: ROMA Downtown Austin Plan Density Bonus proposal

Dear Mayor Leffingwell,

The Heritage Society of Austin (HSA) understands that the Council soon will consider a density bonus proposal for the in-progress Downtown Austin Plan (DAP). We respectfully ask that you place a high priority on the proposal's impact on the preservation of historic resources as you consider that item.



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The Heritage Society firmly supports efforts to increase the density of Austin's downtown. This is the historic core of Austin, and it should grow as Austin does. A more residentially populated and visited downtown will offer the most viable future for adaptive use of historic buildings. Also, maximizing the use of an already developed area is aligned with historic preservation's assertion that the most sustainable model is the use of existing resources. Toward that end, we salute any efforts to encourage development in appropriate areas of downtown. In fact, we suggest that the density bonus provisions be adopted with a "sunset" provision to provide incentive for their utilization. This will also reinforce ROMA's recommendation that the bonuses be recalibrated as circumstances change.

We were pleased to see special considerations for the Northwest District, Judge's Hill and the Warehouse District when determining appropriate and compatible areas for additional density. We also ask that Council honor the Judge's Hill neighborhood's requested boundaries for exclusion from density bonuses.

We are especially concerned that landmarked and landmark-eligible historic downtown properties may become targets for demolition in the districts with density bonuses. In fulfillment of the DAP's overarching goal to "Keep Downtown authentic and diverse," we respectfully urge you to exclude from the density bonus program all properties over 50 years old, until a downtown historic resources survey is completed. Twenty-five years of historic fabric does not appear in the outdated 1984 survey. Our proposed stipulation will both protect any historically significant fabric and prevent protracted zoning cases if development projects unknowingly threaten such properties.

Assembling a survey of information on buildings over 50 years of age will allow more precise determinations of eligibility for Federal Tax Credits for Rehabilitation. This program provides a 20% federal tax credit for rehabilitation of certified historic structures when a project is completed as a certified rehabilitation and a 10% federal tax credit for a certified rehabilitation of "non-historic" properties placed into service before 1936 and rehabilitated for non-residential use. The value of these unrealized tax credits is likely to be in the tens of millions of dollars, not to mention the value that would be created by increasing the tax base and revenue potential of commercial property in downtown Austin.

Finally, the Heritage Society passionately believes that the Warehouse District must be preserved as a unique piece of the historic character of Austin and a popular draw that serves as an underpinning for the economic vitality of Downtown. We applaud the aim of the proposed DAP mechanism to offer the Transfer of Development Rights in the Warehouse District, but don't see an active market for this optional device. In addition to offering TDRs, we urge Council to protect the key blocks of this irreplaceable Austin asset. Surely our city can manage to direct development of these few blocks in a way that preserves the very essence of what makes Austin such a popular destination. The Heritage Society requests that Council direct city staff and ROMA to propose ways to institute protections for this area. Our representatives would like to serve as a resource and participant in those discussions to provide fresh ideas and models for preservation.

We appreciate your consideration of our requests and look forward to working together with you in the coming years on building a great future while respecting and celebrating our history. Thank you for all your past support.

Sincerely,



Jacqui Schraad
Executive Director

cc: Mayor Pro Tem Mike Martinez
Council Member Sheryl Cole
Council Member Laura Morrison
Council Member Chris Riley
Council Member Bill Spelman
Council Member Randi Shade