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[Belton criticized over proposed changes to preservation ordinance](#)

BY GEOFF WEST | TELEGRAM STAFF

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The Belton City Council drew criticism Tuesday from residents opposed to the city's plan to revise the ordinance protecting historic structures in Belton.

Belton Criticized Over Proposed Changes to Preservation Ordinance

by Geoff West - Temple Daily Telegram - 2012-01-11

BELTON - Two residents at a Belton City Council meeting Tuesday criticized city officials for their plans to revise the ordinance that has protected historic homes from demolition since 2009.

Connie Swinden said when she first visited Belton two decades ago she came to love the “abundance of beautiful historic structures and historic neighborhoods” - neighborhoods now in jeopardy, she said, with the city's proposal to protect fewer structures through revisions to the Historic Preservation Ordinance.

The City Council first discussed changes to the ordinance in December, five months after officials passed a moratorium of the ordinance applying to some properties in the West Belton Residential Historic District.

The moratorium ended what was deemed a “friendly lawsuit” between the city and the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, which was forced to sue to appeal a ruling by the Historic Preservation Board, which denied demolition requests for two properties. Filing a lawsuit in district court is required under the existing ordinance.

Swinden called the moratorium “a sad day for Belton.”

“Now you're considering changing the restrictions and watering them down further.”

Nancy Kelsey, who also spoke to the Council on Tuesday during public comments, said the moratorium showed the Council's “unwillingness to abide by the guidelines and ordinance to protect the interest of the community.

“The City Council is a farce and has set themselves as the de facto heritage preservation board.”

Under the city's proposal, demolition protection under the ordinance would only apply to structures with a certain historic value rather across neighborhoods or historic districts.

Membership on the Heritage Preservation Board, a Council-appointed board mostly of preservationists and historians, would require two of the five members come from the city's Planning and Zoning Commission.

Revisions would also change language in the "determination of economic hardship" exemption, which allows a property owner to demolish even historic structures if the financial burden of rehabilitation is too great. Under the revision, an applicant need only "provide evidence" rather than "prove" economic hardship.

There is no clause against purchasing and then abandoning historic properties to the point where rehabilitation is no longer economically feasible.

The University of Mary Hardin-Baylor cited an economic hardship exemption in its request to the Heritage Preservation Board to demolish two homes in the West Belton Residential Historic District, one of six such districts in Belton.

Demolition permits for 716 Wells St. and 229 W. Seventh Ave. were granted by city officials only after the moratorium was passed in July. Both of those properties had historic value, according to the 2006 survey which founded the ordinance, districts and preservation board.

The Belton City Council is expected to vote on revisions to the ordinance prior to the moratorium deadline March 31. gwest@tdtnews

Belton heritage board says preservation is important to city

by Geoff West - Temple Daily Telegram - 2012-01-21

BELTON - Preserving historic districts, not just homes, is how cities across the country reap the true financial and aesthetic benefits of a preservation movement, said Michael Kelsey, chair of the Belton Heritage Preservation Board, in a presentation to the board Friday.

The fate of Belton's six historic districts and the power of the Heritage Preservation Ordinance that has protected its structures from demolition since 2009 are currently in doubt with Belton officials considering changes to the ordinance. Changes include protecting only "contributing" structures, or those at least a half-century old, rather than all homes within a historic district.

In July, the Council passed a moratorium of the ordinance in the West Belton Residential Historic District that ended a lawsuit filed by the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor in opposition to the board's decision to deny demolition permits for two "contributing" university-owned homes.

A property owner must file a lawsuit to appeal a board ruling under the existing ordinance.

Belton mayor pro-tem Marion Grayson said the city will need to better define historic districts as part of the revisions to the ordinance.

Despite language in the ordinance that clearly defines six such districts in Belton, Grayson said the Council never officially designated districts - or at least did not do so carefully enough before adopting the ordinance in 2009.

“We, as a Council, never said these are the historic districts,” Grayson said.

“Districts just got sort of thrown in” before the ordinance was adopted, she said. However, the city spent about six months discussing the inclusion of historic districts in the ordinance during workshops led by former development services director, Fred Morris, prior to its adoption, residents said.

City Manager Sam Listi and Mayor Jim Covington had previous commitments and could not attend Friday, said Council member Craig Pearson, also in attendance.

Either case, preserving districts is as important as individual structures, Kelsey said. He pointed to cities such as Austin and Natchez, Miss., that have reaped its rewards.

“When you’re walking down one of those historic streets, you get immersed in everything beside the buildings. It’s the antique artwork. It’s the cobblestone road,” Kelsey said.

He pointed to the skyrocketing home values in Austin’s historic neighborhood of Hyde Park, where a historic, but otherwise dinky, two-bedroom home goes for hundreds of thousands more because of the unique, historic community created for home-buyers.

Restored homes aren’t valued as high when isolated along some nondescript neighborhood, “but altogether, in a whole neighborhood, they’re worth a lot of money,” Kelsey said.

Preservation can also mean relocating homes that would otherwise be demolished, board members said.

Larry Guess, member of both the preservation board and the Planning and Zoning Commission, said the city owns or has access to more than 150 lots. Relocating homes on those lots could provide both room for the imminent expansion of UMHB and create denser historic districts elsewhere.

“I think that’s something that really needs to be addressed - that these properties can be moved” rather than be demolished, said board member Rae Schmuck.

Pearson, in an interview after the meeting, said he believes UMHB would be in favor of moving, rather demolishing, homes in the West Belton district.

The Council plans to vote on changes to the preservation ordinance prior to the moratorium expiring in March.

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