October 7, 2022

Dear Mayor, members of City Council, and members of the Planning and Zoning Commission,

The Mayor's choice at a recent Council meeting to promote a study of the Comprehensive Plan rather than current zoning ordinances was disappointing. The reality is that no matter the number of surveys or public hearings, a small minority of residents decides on the updates to the Comprehensive Plan, our City ordinances, and the future of Bellaire. They are mostly City officials and members of City Council and the Planning and Zoning Commission.

Page 1.1 of the current Comprehensive Plan describes the plan as a *framework, a vision*, not a rulebook. It describes Bellaire as an *enclave* and the *City of Homes*.

Before your joint workshop this coming Tuesday, October 11, 2022, would each of you please review at least Chapter 5 of the Comprehensive Plan, *Commercial Area Development and Enhancement*? Then take the time to drive down the 5100 and 5200 blocks of Spruce Street.

Spend a little more time in the general commercial area around H-E-B; check out the new construction at the corner of Spruce and Ferris, where the majority of parking is underneath. Is this what residents want in a walkable downtown? Zero front setback and up to 90% lot coverage? Welcome to the UV-D, the Urban Village Downtown District.

Although many more residents spoke against the rezoning of this area in 2014 than supported it, Council passed it by a 5 to 2 vote. Oddly, the only business in that area that appears to have benefitted from the zoning change is H-E-B, since it spans the old CCD-1 and CCD-2 districts and would have violated some zoning requirements. Within a year of the rezoning H-E-B announced plans for their new store at 5106 Bissonnet.

Hopefully after your time in the UV-D you will agree with the many residents who are appalled about the rundown, shabby, crowded and unkempt condition of the area, especially the "ornamental" streetscape with the hit-and-miss public parking areas. At least one parking island adjacent to H-E-B is regularly full of overturned dirt due to vehicles driving over the curb. Gone are the 60' wide streets designed for easy access to businesses and a commercial area serviced by large trucks.

Unfortunately I see this tacky mess almost every day, and I can attest that it is not a pedestrian friendly downtown area. I believe the current zoning has ruined that area, and if left in place that zoning will ruin the Randalls site and destroy Bellaire's image as a City of Homes.

Why would anyone support a zero lot line setback for any structure in a town like Bellaire? It's not as though we're in downtown Manhattan. Why not allow, or even require, room for green space, seating areas, trees, landscaping and surface parking for low-rise buildings? Why would anyone require a 2-story structure when we have a number of one-story commercial buildings that provide services to the public and revenue to the City? Why consider allowing 6-story building PDs adjacent to residences?

Look around West University, Meyerland, Ayrshire, Rice Village and the Braeswood areas, our competition for an attractive place to live. Most of the retail establishments in those areas are located in one-story buildings. Meanwhile, due to the current zoning, we may lose business developments that Bellaire residents would appreciate and visit.

Multi-family developments have been promoted as desirable in both the UV-D and UV-T. The original premise was that older Bellaire residents want to sell their homes and move to an apartment or a condo. Ask yourself, is that how you hope to live in your retirement, in a rented apartment or in a condo, surrounded by tenants moving in and out? Only 10 of the 27 condos at the corner of Mapleridge and Jessamine in Houston are homesteaded. And now the premise has apparently switched to children of residents, who want to live closer to their families.

The UV-T suffers from the same grandiose visions as the UV-D. The transit lines in the Metro center on Westpark are used for buses, not light rail, and the "walkable" Uptown development sites located in Houston west of the UV-T are now occupied by Walmart, Microcenter, fast food places and a hotel. Additional construction on the 610/59/69 exchange has lead to a change in the 610 South lanes bordering Bellaire, making access to that area even more difficult.

But not to worry, the Comprehensive Plan has a plan for that: *"Properties conducive for redevelopment in Bellaire's UV-T district could still follow a different path, with a more mixed-use and walkable design"*. But a local business has been advised that a very walkable design for an urban farm would not be acceptable under the current zoning. Personally, I'm keeping my fingers crossed that this business plan succeeds. You might visit that area, too.

By now you may have guessed that I fully support a long, hard look at the zoning in the UV-D and the UV-T. And based on the ugly view of the rear of a building built out to the property line on Bissonnet at the corner of Newcastle, the CMU also has problems. What do you want to see when you drive down Bellaire Blvd? Wall-to-wall 5-story buildings and parking garages right up to the property line? Or attractive 1, 2, or 3-story buildings surrounded by easily accessible parking areas and shady green space?

Where in the Comprehensive Plan can I find specific recommendations for onerous requirements like zero setback or 2-story minimum height in the UV-D or UV-T? Meanwhile, please do not allow any more developments with zero setbacks or minimum height requirements in our City, and let's put a hold on Planned Developments. Let's keep Bellaire a hometown, not a business center.

Thank you,

Jane McNeel
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