

Broker calls building moratorium 'meaningless'

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Mayor Martin Chavez's call for a moratorium on the construction of multi-family housing in the city's Trumbull/La Mesa neighborhood is meaningless because the area is built out and doesn't have much vacant land, says one real estate broker.

And the problem that Chavez says he wants to fix in the area -- a high concentration of non-owner occupied duplexes and four-plexes -- was created in good part by city policy in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

"It's kind of meaningless. There are not a lot of big parcels to build on," says Todd Clarke, NM Apartments, of Chavez's proposed moratorium. "It's kind of like the mayor saying 'I don't want any more large Wal-Mart Supercenters to be built Downtown.' We'd all be scratching our heads because there's nowhere to put a Wal-Mart Downtown."

In fact, no large, multi-family developments were built in the neighborhood between 1993 and 1998, when 6,902 apartment units were built in Albuquerque. The only new multi-family development in the area is the recently completed 96-unit first phase of the Aspen Plaza project on Louisiana Southeast near Gibson.

Chavez says the proposed year-long moratorium is needed so the city can decide how to change development goals for the area, which is bounded by Lomas and Gibson on the north and south, and Wyoming and Louisiana on the east and west. Twenty-one percent of the neighborhood's housing stock is multi-family units, compared to two percent in the rest of the city.

Many of those multi-family units are run-down duplexes and four-plexes that are owned by absentee landlords, Chavez says, adding that they are home to drug dealers and prostitutes. The absentee landlords don't check their prospective tenants closely, and those tenants have helped increase crime in the area, which has long been known as Albuquerque's "War Zone," Chavez says. About 70 percent of the calls to the city's Nuisance Abatement Task Force come from the Trumbull/La Mesa area.

"We think this moratorium for a year will allow us to get a fix on this issue. I'd like to see more of a balance and more single-family housing in the area," Chavez says.

It was city policies, though, that led to the proliferation of multi-family housing in the area. In the late 1960s, Albuquerque was having one of its cyclical housing shortages, Clarke says. The shortage was fueled by an increase in enrollment at the University of New Mexico and by an increase in membership in the armed services. To alleviate the shortage and to supply housing for students and military personnel stationed at Kirtland Air Force Base, city leaders decided to allow high-density, multi-family housing in a square-mile area in the neighborhood, Clarke says.

But rather than assembling large parcels of land and attracting a few large developments that would have had professional managers and maintenance budgets, the city encouraged individual property owners to build duplexes and four-plexes, Clarke says. That led to hundreds of small developments by property owners who might not have had the financial muscle to maintain their properties.

Then, in the 1980s, people bought properties as tax shelters. Original owners sold their properties, often to out-of-state owners. "We had hundreds of landlords in the area from out of California and Texas," Clarke says. And over the years, as the units deteriorated, that mass ownership created a nightmare for the city's code enforcement officials, Clarke adds. Rather than having four or five owners to go after, the city has a thousand different owners to notify if there are code violations. City Planning Director Vic Chavez says the moratorium is needed so the city can figure out how to change zoning and development regulations for the area.

"The use of higher densityTo: "Todd Clarke 2

housing in that area has resulted in a different ending than has higher density housing in other areas of the city," he says. "We want to look at the sector plan to see how we can change the guidelines so we wind up with different results. We want to reclaim the area. We want to look to see if we can accumulate enough land that could still be used for high-density housing, but that could be done differently." The area's city councilor, Hess Yntema, says the mayor's call for a moratorium is more style than substance. "I'm always amazed that the mayor gets great TV coverage for calling a press conference and announcing something that is not very effective or is stupid," Yntema says.
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