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NEWS

Councilman Marc Whyte fights affordable housing project in his district

By **Molly Smith, Madison Iszler**, Staff writers Sep 18, 2024



District 10 Councilman Marc Whyte makes remarks in support of the city's financing deal for a new downtown Missions baseball stadium at a City Council meeting on Sept. 12, 2024, in San Antonio, Texas.

Christopher Lee / Staff Photographer

City Councilman Marc Whyte and homeowners in his Northeast Side district are fighting a first-of-its-kind project pairing affordable apartments and a pre-K facility.

They are seeking to block zoning and planning changes required for the complex to be built along Nacogdoches Road.

“This is a good project, but just the wrong area for it,” Whyte said. “There are plenty of other areas – in District 10 as well – where this project may fit.”

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But some of Whyte’s colleagues appear poised to green-light the proposal, which they say provides housing many residents need – a departure from the norm at City Hall. Council members typically follow the lead of the council colleague in whose district a zoning case is playing out.

City Council is scheduled to vote on the project on Thursday.

The need for more affordable housing was a burning issue in the weeks leading up to the council’s 9-2 vote on Sept. 12 to approve a public financing deal with the owners of the San Antonio Missions for a downtown ballpark. The stadium plans require razing the 381-unit Soap Factory Apartments, a rare affordable housing option downtown, where the average rent is \$900 a month.

Before voting for the stadium deal last week, District 4 Councilwoman Adriana Rocha Garcia noted the upcoming vote on Vista Park Apartments –after Whyte passionately defended the Missions owners after Soap Factory residents lashed out at them.

“What I will not have, and what I believe is detrimental to the future of this city, is when we vilify businesspeople because of the resources that they have,” Whyte said.

Rocha Garcia, a 2025 mayoral candidate, followed up when it was her turn to speak.

“Councilman Whyte just said something that reminded me that next week we’re going to have a vote about housing, that’s going to be critical,” she said.

“Councilman Whyte just said we will not vilify the people for the resources that they have, and so just something to consider as we think this through.”

Rocha Garcia is board president of the San Antonio Housing Trust, a nonprofit created to help produce affordable housing, including the planned Vista Park Apartments that require rezoning the property from commercial to mixed-use and changing the area’s land-use classification.

District 3 Councilwoman Phyllis Viagran, who serves as board treasurer, said she supports these changes, citing the city’s Strategic Housing Implementation Plan, which calls for building or preserving more than 28,000 affordable homes by 2031.

Neighbors ght project

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Miami-based developer Atlantic Pacific Cos. and local firm OCI Development plan to build an 85-unit apartment complex on about 4.5 acres of vacant land along Nacogdoches near the intersection of Spring Farm and Spring Moon streets.

The companies' partnership with the housing trust means the \$25.7 million complex would be exempt from property taxes, in exchange for the developers setting aside at least half of the apartments for residents making less than the area median income.

The studio and two-bedroom units at Vista Park would be for tenants earning up to 60% of the area median income, with rents projected to range from \$310 to \$1,195 a month depending on income level and apartment size.

The property would also have a pre-K facility for up to 23 children, said Olivia Travieso, partner and co-founder of OCI Development.

The pre-K facility would be operated by Essence Preparatory Public School and be free for Vista Park tenants. It would also be open to children in the surrounding area, Travieso said.

Some Spring Creek homeowners are fighting the proposal.

They told the city's Planning and Zoning commissions they are concerned the complex would generate more traffic and crime, cause drainage problems, lead to lower property values and the removal of trees, jeopardize their privacy and add to a glut of apartments in the area. Some said they had not been notified of the plans and criticized the developers' communication with nearby homeowners.

"It's too much — we're turning into Houston," one nearby resident told the Planning Commission in April. "I would appreciate if you all would keep San Antonio residential and feeling like home."

In response, Atlantic Pacific and OCI Development reduced the height of the buildings to three stories from four, proposed a wood privacy fence and landscape buffer, and designed most windows and balconies to face the courtyard and Nacogdoches Road.

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Even with that height reduction, however, Whyte said the complex is still too tall, and that the 50-foot setback between the complex and the neighboring property line isn't large enough.

"You can imagine a three-story complex sort of towering over your single-family homes," he said.

He agrees with neighbors that a new apartment complex would increase traffic in what is "already a very dense area," with three complexes directly across Nacogdoches.

'No project is perfect'

Research indicates that newly-built affordable housing has not increased crime, Travieso said, and drainage run-off from Vista Park would be directed toward a detention system away from Spring Creek.

A study commissioned by Atlantic Pacific and OCI Development projects traffic from Vista Park would be one-third the congestion resulting from a shopping center or restaurants, the type of development allowed at the property under the current zoning.

"Our affordable housing communities are typically viewed as assets in their neighborhoods because they provide severely needed attainable housing for a variety of key members of the local workforce," Travieso said.

Residents of other San Antonio complexes built by Atlantic Pacific, such as Vista at Everest in council District 1 and Vista at Interpark in District 9, described the affordable housing communities as safe and comfortable.

"I don't know where I would be without them," one tenant told the Zoning Commission in July.

City staff and the council-appointed Planning and Zoning commissions recommend that the City Council approve the rezoning and land-use requests.

Commissioners said the developers' proposal is appropriate for the site, given the nearby apartments and businesses and location along a major road. It's also in line

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with city officials' goal of adding more affordable housing in San Antonio as the city's population continues to soar, they said.

The mayor and the 10-member City Council have the final say in the zoning case. Whyte said he supports increasing affordable housing options in District 10.

He said he would prefer to see a complex go up on vacant land near Rolling Oaks Mall, which is about two miles from the proposed Vista Park location. He hasn't talked to neighbors who live near that property, but said it's an area that the housing trust has eyed for potential projects.

Whyte said he doesn't know whether last week's ballpark vote — and the resulting loss of affordable housing downtown — will affect how much his colleagues take his constituents' opposition into account.

“Whether or not they're feeling pressure, I don't know,” he said. “But I do know that we all support affordable housing projects, but our desire for affordable housing cannot cause us to disregard land-use principles and the sentiment of our neighborhoods.”

Rocha Garcia said she hopes Whyte supports the planning and zoning request on Thursday.

“He said last week, ‘No project is perfect.’ And he said, we're never going to be in a situation where all our folks are happy,” she said. “And that's exactly what's going to happen this week.”

<https://www.expressnews.com/news/article/vista-park-apartments-zoning-request-19768431.php>

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