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Mesquite has rejected affordable housing for nine years. This week, the city said no again

The city's planning and zoning commission rejected the project even after public comment in which supporters outnumbered opponents 3 to 1.



Mesquite resident Elizabeth Rodriguez spoke before the Mesquite planning and zoning commission on Monday, June 27, 2022, in support of a plan to build the city's first reduced-rent housing project development in nine years. Commissioners rejected the proposal in a 5-1 vote. (Lola Gomez / Staff Photographer)

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Mesquite's planning and zoning commission voted Monday to deny a developer's request to build 90 units of income-restricted housing off U.S. Highway 80.

The apartments would have added to Mesquite's tight apartment stock, which has shrunk over the years even as demand has spiked across the metroplex.

Commissioners voted 5-1 on a motion to deny the developer's request for a zoning change from commercial to residential needed for the project to go forward. The vote came despite an outpouring from residents who packed City Council chambers in support of the project.

The city received 59 letters of support and 24 letters in opposition, according to planning documents. Mesquite ISD also wrote a letter of support to the mayor and City Council in February, citing the need to serve the community.

The developer of the project, Darren Smith, head of development for MVAH Partners' Southwest Division, said he's never seen a commission vote against the will of the majority of citizens like this in his 25 years working on multifamily housing projects.

"I didn't get the vote. But it's clear the citizens believe there needs to be diverse housing," he said.

In many ways, the vote highlighted a debate that has echoed in Mesquite for nearly decade: Its citizens support affordable housing development. Just not here, and not now. Critics of the plan also raised the usual concerns about increased traffic and crime in the area. Commissioner Claude McBride, who brought forward the motion, was the only vote against denying the zoning change.

Commissioners Millie Arnold, Roger Melend, Sherry Williams, Sheila Lynn and Debbie Screws voted down the development — and against the more than 100 voices who spoke at the hearing or wrote letters to the City Council in support of the project.

'Not the Mesquite I want to live in'

More than 50 people packed City Hall's council chambers, including five people who spoke in opposition to the development — some of whom argued the location sandwiched between retail and another apartment complex was a lousy spot to build multifamily housing.

The planning commission was the second hurdle the developer needed to clear to build the apartments. In February, the City Council narrowly approved a resolution of support for the project. The vote came after a heated debate in which many residents said Mesquite needs more affordable — a problem that third-party audits have documented for years.

Speakers in support of the project outnumbered those against it 3 to 1.

Dozens of supporters — some of whom spoke, wrote letters to council and signed petitions backing the project — pleaded for the city to help cost-burdened residents by giving them more housing options.

Shannon Long, a 35-year resident of Mesquite, was listening to a live stream of the meeting and drove to City Hall to beg for the project's approval. Long, mother to a Mesquite ISD teacher, spoke through tears and a shaking voice about her daughter's futile hunt for an affordable apartment.

"I also see my kids not being able to live in the city that I raised them in because they can't afford to live here," Long said. "And that's not the Mesquite I want to live in."



Darren Smith (left), head of development for MVAH Partners' Southwest Division, shown at Mesquite's planning and zoning meeting on Monday, June 27, 2022, said he's never seen a commission reject the will of the majority as commissioners did by turning down his firms' widely supported proposal to building 90 units of affordable housing in the city.(Lola Gomez / Staff Photographer)

Alex Harris, a Mesquite resident, condemned the city's lack of multifamily developments, arguing that the low apartment stock and lack of competition enabled the landlord to neglect tenants at the Hillcrest Apartments, where widespread code violations and AC failures have led to legal action.

Mesquite is suing the landlord to bring the facility into compliance, but to no avail: Residents have continued to report the same problems for months. Local housing authorities have told tenants who pay rent with government vouchers that they need to find somewhere else to live; Hillcrest can't pass required inspections. But residents have said for months that, despite calling apartments all day long, there's nowhere for them to go.

"Why do we need this particular project to be approved? Because of the people at the Hillcrest Apartments," Harris said. "The city for years has had a war against poor people."

Harris' comment, met with cheers and jeers from the crowd, echoed a call from supporters who believe the city isn't providing housing options for Mesquite's neediest residents.

Council member Jeff Casper encouraged supporters after the meeting not to lose hope, and to vote, signaling that winning elections and changing the people in power will propel change.

Casper and Elizabeth Rodriguez-Ross, who lost her council race to Jennifer Vidler last year, urged supporters also to channel their energy by serving on boards and commissions.

City's history of housing issues

It's been nine years since Mesquite has approved workforce housing developments — even though the city has documented the need for more in its own reports since then. The city also implemented a six-month moratorium in 2018 that banned all new multifamily proposals from developers — a move that housing experts say is uncommon.

The commission's rejection of rent-reduced housing comes amidst a national housing affordability crisis that hasn't spared the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

While Mesquite's own reports have echoed the need for more affordable housing, the city is considering a zoning and development code overhaul that would hike the minimum permitted home size by more than 30%. The change would bar the construction of homes smaller than 2,000 square feet.

Housing policy experts say the change could further price people out of the city and affect Black and Hispanic residents the most.

After Monday's meeting concluded, Casper took to social media to encourage local housing advocates to look to the future of the city they hope to create.

"There'll come a day when the pockets of hope we created overwhelm and overtake, with onlookers surprised by the suddenness of the change," he wrote.

"But we'll know — the years of work, of networking and organizing, of pushing inch by inch, together. Our Mesquite proudly."