

Homestead preservation district resisted by residents

By [Marty Toohey](#) | Tuesday, December 23, 2008, 11:55 AM

The Travis County Commissioners decided Tuesday to delay a vote on a complicated plan intended to keep residents of Central East Austin in their homes.

The commissioners decided the City of Austin had not given them enough time to analyze the details of the proposed "homestead preservation district." Several East Austin residents and activists told commissioners that they don't trust city administrators and want more details on the district before it becomes a reality.

The district would take a portion of the sales and property taxes generated in Central East Austin and use them to fund a land bank serving the area. The land bank would, in turn, buy the land underneath the homes of willing residents. Those residents would then not have to pay property taxes on the land. The owner of the house would have restrictions on who they could sell to.

The land bank could also finance other housing projects intended for low-income residents.

The idea, which originated with state Rep. Eddie Rodriguez of East Austin, is intended to reduce the tax burden of lower-or-fixed income residents whose taxes are rising as property values skyrocket in that part of town. The Legislature authorized it in 2005. Both the City of Austin and Travis County would have to participate for the East Austin district to become a reality.

The City Council approved its end on Dec. 18. The city was pushing the county to make a decision today.

Former Austin City Manager Toby Futrell had resisted the proposal, saying that it could obligate the city to set aside money for an East Austin program that otherwise would have gone into the citywide coffers. The city would be obligated to the arrangement for years, regardless of the economic situation.

County Commissioner Ron Davis, who represents East Austin, cited those and other concerns.

"All of the citizens of Travis County would have to pick up the tab on the taxes being lost," said Davis, who urged the commissioners not to participate.

"That's the case with all government programs ... we just have to be mindful of who we're giving the benefit to, and who we're shifting the burden to," said Commissioner Sarah Eckhardt, who also wanted time for more analysis.

Longtime East Austin resident Scottie Ivory was among those who also urged the commissioners to slow down until the questions of the neighborhoods affected were answered. Some residents worried it could amount to the city

"I don't trust the city, and I don't trust the county," said Ivory, citing long-standing East Austin grievances against the city dating back to the late 1920s, when the City Council passed a zoning ordinance that effectively consigned most blacks and Hispanics to living east of Interstate 35.

"The city will toss East Austin a bone," Ivory said, "and then pull it back on a string."

Margaret Shaw, the director of the city's Neighborhood Housing and Community Development department, emphasized that the program is voluntary.

"I want to make clear that nobody's home is being taken away," she said at the commissioners meeting. Afterward, she said: "What the community wanted is more information, and my staff will be getting it for them."