

## History and housing clash Downtown Groups fight TVO and La Fe apartment project

By Timothy Roberts  
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A non-profit group and an international developer have plans to build the first new housing in Downtown El Paso in many years. It's just what Downtown advocates have been calling for: places for people to live near the heart of the city.

That's one way of looking at the plans for 91 new apartments in two three-story buildings near the historic Magoffin Home.

Here's another point of view from the neighbors: "It's a very inappropriate project for the area," says Ricardo Gonzalez, an attorney who owns two houses nearby. "It will destroy the historic character of the area."

The City Plan Commission gave its unanimous consent to a zoning change request by the property owners in November. The next step comes Wednesday when the Historic Landmark Commission meets to consider the Magoffin Park Villas project. And there the project may run into some trouble.

The city's historic preservation officer, who gives the Landmark Commission his recommendation, is saying no way.

Troy Ainsworth, the historic preservation officer, says that property owner La Fe and developer TVO North America, which is based in El Paso, need to lower the profile of the roof, use better building materials and promise to upgrade the aluminum windows. Russ Vandenburg, a prominent El Paso businessman, is the the president/CEO of TVO.

La Fe and TVO aren't commenting, but Ainsworth says he met with the architect for the project, Dallas-based Robert Finta, a possible indication that some movement may be afoot.

But to get past the Landmark Commission, the developer will have to make considerable changes to the plans that could drive up the cost. Twenty percent of the units will be rented at less-than-market rates, making the project eligible for about \$1.5 million in affordable housing money from the city. The total cost of the project would be many times that.

At the planning commission meeting Nov. 20, the attorney for the project, Risher Gilbert, said the development would be "a catalyst for the neighborhood." Opponents she said, may want to move away.

"The people who are down on this neighborhood will be able to sell their properties at a profit and move out," she said, according to a video of the meeting available on the city's Web site.

The city is looking for new residential development in Downtown. It's a major part of plans to bring the area to life. Apartments in the Magoffin neighborhood would fit in with the development of a new federal courthouse a few blocks away.

But it should be the right kind of housing, said Bernie Sargent, who chairs the El Paso County Historical Commission. It should be "housing that looks like it belongs in the neighborhood."

"We are not opposed to housing," he said. "But this development is so out of place. It's so large, and it obscures the ambiance of the district."

The historical commission voted unanimously last Monday to oppose the project, although its decision is non-binding.

A few days before, Preservation Texas joined the historic clamor, criticizing several aspects of the proposal.

In a Dec. 22 letter to a consultant working on the project, it said that the building turns its back to Magoffin Street, putting its parking lot to face Magoffin Street, the gateway to the historic district. It notes that the scale of the building would be "very large even in relation to the multi-family buildings" nearby. And the project would close Ange Street.

"This will change the historic street pattern and reduce mobility in the district. It will also result in loss of on-street parking," the state agency for historic preservation says.

The state historic commission has a special interest in the outcome of this case. It owns the Magoffin Home. On its Web site, it calls the 19-room adobe house a fine example of Territorial-style architecture. It's named for Joseph Magoffin, a pioneer and early mayor of El

Paso. He built the place in 1875.

It is likely that the issue will end up before the El Paso City Council, which is the final arbiter of such matters. The councilman for the district, Beto O'Rourke, is likely to have considerable importance in the way the issue turns out. And he says he favors the development as a good compromise between history and housing.

"We need to encourage context-sensitive development," he said. "At the same time, you really don't want to put up too many roadblocks when you have something really special happening in an area that hasn't seen any investment in, I mean, decades."