

It's the residents, stupid

By Timothy Roberts

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Editor's note: Last week El Paso Inc. writer Timothy Roberts broke the story of a proposed apartment complex Downtown, the first such project in decades. He updates the story on p. 3A, and adds some thoughts to the matter here.

When La Fe Community Development Corporation and its partner TVO North America brought its plans to the Historic Landmark Commission on Wednesday, the commissioners were aghast at the size of the project: 91 units in two three-story buildings. For that and other reasons a majority of the commissioners voted it down. It goes before the City Council on Tuesday.

Of course, anything built on those mostly empty blocks near the Magoffin Home is bound to look big. The very concept of building new housing Downtown has got to shock at least a little bit.

El Paso is the last Southwestern city to make a serious investment in its Downtown, having long favored helter-skelter suburban-style development. This has led to some very ugly developments along poorly paved ribbons of undulating asphalt, foolish development on arroyos and the need to drive a car to go anywhere.

And now La Fe enters the stage with plans for a pair of Downtown apartment buildings. Certainly its plans would be less controversial if the buildings weren't so close to the Magoffin historic site, but that wasn't the only objection the commissioners had.

Nickolas Markovich criticized the plans for their faux New Urbanism. "Where is the local grocery store?" he asked. Although the project includes 1,700-square-feet of retail, there's no guarantee that a small grocery store will lease the space. "Which comes first, the chicken or the egg?" responded Carlos Gallinar, the director of La Fe Community Development Corp.

For the answer to that question, ask any retailer. The residents have got to be there before the grocery or any other store opens. The saying "the customer always comes first," is not just good business, it's the basic economic principle of retail. No one is going to open a store where there are no customers.

If this were a political campaign, the motto might be, "It's the residents, stupid." All the success stories of Downtown redevelopment involve enticing people to live there. Most first attempts involve the creation of a noisy, undesirable entertainment district. Good luck getting hard-working, taxpayers to live there. Sometimes it involves a baseball stadium.

Only the diehard sports fan will want to live next to that much noise. Some cities prefer to focus on office towers and hotels for visitors. The reason these plans fail is that in these plans the resident comes last.

The City Council will decide if the La Fe development is the right one for the blocks near the Magoffin Home. But whatever they decide, let's hope they think very hard about how to encourage more people to live Downtown, where they are sorely needed.