

Houston Heights Historic Districts Design Guidelines

Community Meeting #1

December 8, 2015

Steph McDougal, project manager

Meeting Summary

The first public meeting for the Houston Heights Historic Districts design guidelines project was held on Tuesday, December 8, 2015, in the 1819 Parish Hall of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church at 1819 Heights Boulevard. All of the community meetings for this project will be held in this location, which is centrally located within the Heights, with ample parking and an accessible elevator to the second-floor meeting room.

The meeting was publicized through the City of Houston Planning and Development Department website, CitizensNet, and an email message to an existing mailing list of Heights property owners. A press release was picked up for a front-page article by *The Leader*, a community newspaper serving the Heights, and project manager Steph McDougal appeared on the KUHT public radio show "Houston Matters." A letter mailed to all property owners in the three Houston Heights historic districts included information about the meeting and encouraged people to attend.

The meeting was scheduled from 5:30-7:30 p.m. and was divided into two parts: a presentation and a period for participants to share their feedback. The presentation portion began at 5:35 p.m., to accommodate latecomers, and lasted for about 40 minutes. This was followed by approximately 40 minutes of questions and answers, at which time the organized portion of the meeting concluded, and participants were encouraged to share their feedback. Many people provided input in writing, while others spoke directly to the Planning staff in attendance. Everyone had departed by 7:30 p.m.

Sixty people attended the meeting. All three Houston Heights historic districts were represented, as well as two other historic districts and a number of people who have commercial interests, but no property, in the districts.

- Houston Heights East (23 attendees)
- Houston Heights West (11 attendees)
- Houston Heights South (13 attendees)
- Norhill (1)
- Woodland Heights (1)
- Builders, architects, or Realtors who are not historic district property owners (5)
- Others who are not historic district property owners (4)
- Unknown (2)

The number of attendees from each historic district was relatively in keeping with the size of that district.

District	# Properties	% of All 3 Districts	# Attendees	% of All Attendees
Heights East	778	38%	23	38%
Heights West	517	25%	11	18%
Heights South	770	37%	13	22%

Questions and Answers

During the question-and-answer period, attendees raised topics that were both within the scope of this project and outside of it. Many questions had to do with the initial designation of the historic districts, which took place in 2007, 2008, and 2011; the 2015 ordinance amendments; and participants' experience with the Certificate of Appropriateness process. Questions about this project included:

Q. Will the 2008 design guide prepared by Jonathan Smulian be used as a starting point?

A: It will be made available to the consulting firm selected to prepare the design guidelines.

Q. Will the new design guidelines deal with land and drainage?

A: We can let the consulting firm know that that is a concern.

Q. Will the new design guidelines include things like fences or landscaping?

A: The design guidelines will include both mandatory considerations, as well as suggestions for things that are not covered by the ordinance, such as fences, landscaping, or paint color. If the community wants to regulate something that is not included in the ordinance, or that is listed as eligible for an exemption or administrative approval, that item can be included in the design guidelines as well.

Q. Will the design guidelines clarify the ambiguous wording in the ordinance about setbacks?

A: The design guidelines are intended to clarify how the ordinance is to be applied to each historic district, so setback requirements for the three Heights districts will be both clarified and illustrated in the design guidelines.

Feedback from the Community

An important part of the meeting involved collecting feedback from attendees, which will be provided to the consulting firm once they are hired. Attendees were asked to answer the following four questions:

- What makes the Heights special?
- Why did you want to live in the Heights?
- What would you want to have built next to YOUR house?
- What would you NOT want to have built next to your house?

Each of four feedback stations consisted of a long table with a poster board containing one of these questions, set up on a table-top easel. Response cards and colored sticky notes, as well as pens and markers, were provided at each station. Most attendees chose to write their answers on sticky notes and post those on the poster boards. A total of 98 sticky notes or response cards were submitted, containing a total of 211 individual comments; a summary is provided on the following page.

Following the meeting, several people sent email messages to ask questions and convey further feedback. All feedback from the public is being collected and will be published at reasonable intervals, as well as provided to the design guidelines consulting firm.

Note: For the purpose of counting topics raised by attendees, similar comments have been grouped together under a representative descriptor. When an individual comment included multiple topics, such as "Trees, walkability," those topics have been counted separately in order to determine the number of people who commented on each topic.

Question 1. What made you want to live in the Heights?

- Location; proximity to downtown, outdoor pocket parks, bayous, etc. (11)
- Walkability/bikeability (10)
- Historic houses (9)
- The small-town character/charm (7)
- Trees and green spaces (6)
- Neighborhood or community qualities (6)
- Small scale of buildings (3)
- Quiet (2)
- Value, affordability (in 1970s/1980s) (2)
- Grew up in the Heights (2)
- Consistent setback from street (1)
- The combination of diverse visual cues and the "ribbon" of continuity of these visual cues (1)
- My five-car garage (1)
- Post office delivers to my mailbox (1)
- No liquor (1)

Question 2. What makes the Heights special?

- Historic homes (15)
- Walkability, bikeability, sidewalks (15)
- Proximity to shopping, services, restaurants, downtown (10)
- Trees, gardens, parks (10)
- Consistent but interesting (not cookie-cutter) houses (9)
- Small-town atmosphere, single-family homes, no high-rises (8)
- Porches; opportunity for social contact (4)
- People; community (3)
- The surety and flexibility of the "grid" street system; square blocks (2)
- Streetscapes; streets with ditches (2)
- Low traffic; minimal commercial development (2)
- Schools (1)

- The variety of the demographics (1)
- The lack of bars and cantinas (1)
- Arts (1)
- Me (1)

Question 3. What would you want built next door to YOUR house?

- A house with size and style consistent with the rest of the block (19)
- A house with setback consistent with the block (6)
- A building that preserves mature trees, leaves an adequate yard, doesn't flood my house/yard/alley (5)
- Two-story home (3)
- Tasteful design/addition (3)
- A house that does not tower over my backyard or block the sun; something that "respects my house and property" (2)
- Residential, not commercial (2)
- Small, one-story house (2)
- No "pop-up" in back (1)
- Well-built "modest- sized homes, either one- or two-story (1)
- Whatever the property owner wants (1)
- New single homes that look historic but are built well (1)

Question 4. What would you NOT want to have built next door to your house?

- A massive, oversized house out of scale with the rest of the street (15)
- A commercial, retail, or bar establishment or high traffic generator (9)
- A building that does not fit in visually with the rest of the traditional neighborhood (8)
- A house that is only a few feet from our shared property line or that covers the entire lot (7)
- Camelbacks or large additions to small bungalows (5)
- A house that towers over my house/takes away my privacy (4)
- A house with improper drainage/drains into adjacent property or alley (2)
- Multi-family dwelling (2)
- Being forced to keep a small box in front of a new home (1)
- Nothing that decreases street parking, i.e. curb cuts (1)
- An abandoned, falling-down shack (1)
- Private property: build what you want! (1)
- Two townhomes on a 50x100 lot (1)

Conclusion

As indicated by answers to Questions 1 and 2, people attending this meeting value the character of the Heights, which includes a small-town atmosphere, a diverse assortment of historic architecture, and mature trees, parks, and gardens; the ability to walk or bike to shops, restaurants, and other businesses; and its proximity to downtown Houston. The descriptor “a small town in a big city” encapsulates many of the comments that were received at the meeting.

Overwhelmingly, the comments provided in answer to the Questions 3 and 4 indicated that people attending this meeting do not want to live next door to houses that:

- Are “oversized” and out of scale with the rest of the street
- Do not visually “fit in” with the rest of the street
- Are built close to a shared property line and/or tower over adjacent property owners’ backyards, reducing or eliminating the adjacent homeowner’s privacy
- Require the removal of mature trees, which may adversely impact next-door neighbors, as well as the streetscape generally
- Cover so much of the lot that rain cannot be absorbed into the remaining exposed ground and instead drains to neighboring lots or shared alleyways

Some of these comments reflect a desire to maintain the current look-and-feel of the street on which people live; others speak directly to the adverse impacts that new construction and large additions can have on neighbors.

It is important to note that this process can only provide the opportunity for people to give feedback; it does not require property owners to participate. As a result, the conclusions drawn will necessarily represent those property owners who choose to participate. Because this data was collected from a small group, it cannot be extrapolated to represent all residents in the Houston Heights Historic Districts. A survey in March 2016 will help to determine the extent to which these comments are supported by the districts in total.