Designation of new historic district gets criticism from property owners

Officials say move was needed to preserve area

By JAIME JORDAN Staff Writer
Published January 17, 2002

Jim Massey has owned his building at 506 W. Dallas Road in Grapevine since 1994, but a City Council decision Tuesday left him feeling like a tenant on his own property.

"I just feel like they've pretty much taken over my property without my permission, and [they're] letting me use it," Mr. Massey said. "I worked hard to buy that building, and it's mine and I want to be able to paint it the color I want to."

Grapevine's Historic Preservation Commission received council approval Tuesday for a Cottonbelt Railroad Historic Overlay District to include commercial properties along the south side of Hudgins Street from Ira E. Woods Avenue to Dooley Street.

The commission had been considering the district because of the importance of both the railroad and the surrounding buildings to Grapevine's transportation and agricultural development, according to the request.

Although the Cottonbelt Railroad district has been listed in the national registry since 1997, commission members said it was essential to establish an official district to preserve the area's status on the registry, said Hugo Gardea, the city's historic preservation officer.
"The primary concern was that at the local level the commission and city didn't have any impact on the preservation of these properties," Mr. Gardea said. "If they were adversely altered, the city could lose its national register listing."

Certificate required

As part of the district, property owners will have to seek from the preservation commission a certificate of approval for any external changes they make to the property, including painting, landscaping, signage and major renovations such as demolition, new construction and additions.

They will be approved only if the changes conform to the look of the homes in the time period that has been established for the district - 1888 to 1956.

Planning and Zoning Commission members were split over the decision to put all the property owners into the overlay district, voting 4-3 to approve.

Larry Oliver, planning commission chairman, voted in favor of the district but said he was torn.

"I also have this great fear of our encroachment into people's private property," he said. "It's a tough deal. It's really a tough deal."

Residents such as Mr. Massey felt their voices were not heard.

Mr. Gardea said the commission held two public meetings in 2000, one in 2001 and a public hearing in 2001.

"I feel we had plenty of discussion," he said. "Four meetings I think is plenty of time to get the message out to owners. Some of the owners did object, but the commission strongly felt that the district nomination should move forward."

City Council members approved the district unanimously. The city received two letters supporting the district and five opposing the district.

Council member Clydene Johnson said the benefits of approving the district far outweighed the cons.

"I didn't feel it was that much of a burden with those property owners that were in that district," she said. "I feel confident that [most] improvements we would OK even though they may not conform."

Ms. Johnson said the concerns of property owners that their rights were being infringed on were taken into consideration.
"That is a concern, but I feel like there are more benefits to this," she said. "We talked about the Jess Daniel building. It's been such a tremendous thing for the building owner and city, and it helps promote our tourism, which helps everyone down there."

Mr. Daniel owns property on Main Street in the district and has multiple tenants on his property, including a restaurant, hair salon and decorative jewelry store.

He was in favor of the establishment of the historic district because he was the direct recipient of the benefits.

"I'm a strong proponent of historic preservation," Mr. Daniel said. "I have seen myself the value [of historic preservation] to the city; it's tax base, owners of the property and people who rent or use the property. I see value in this."

Selling power hurt?

Mr. Massey and some other residents who opposed the district plan said they were concerned about what the district would do to their ability to sell their buildings.

J. Andrew Hansz, an assistant professor of finance and real estate at the University of Texas at Arlington, said there are two arguments when it comes to the impact historic districts have on property values.

"With all these extra restrictions, it's going to cost much more to remodel or renovate," Dr. Hansz said. "It's an extra layer of restrictions or requirements. The flip side is the whole area must conform to these restrictions, so there's less risk of your neighbor doing some remodeling that's not congruent with the neighborhood."

Dr. Hansz said studies have been done on how historic districts affect property values, although most have been in relation to residential districts.

Harold Hunt, a research analyst with the Real Estate Center at Texas A&M University, cited one study done by two professors from Temple University that focused on real estate values of areas with historic designations.

"Based on what they've written, it's really a mixed bag," Mr. Hunt said. "They often give incentives to do historic districts so you might get a tax break. There are a lot of ways they can make property owners make it attractive, but there also are detriments because they can lose some of their property rights."

Mr. Gardea said although the city has an incentive program for its residential district, one does not exist for the commercial
historic district.

Staff writer Jaime Jordan can be reached at 817-410-9602, ext. 4967, and at jjordan@dallasnews.com.