

Neighborhood Revitalization

So what the heck was the City's Planning Commission thinking, when they told Advocap they couldn't rebuild a front porch using green treated lumber? Precedent, that's what.

We've all heard the story – how Advocap, a private nonprofit agency that provides services to low income households, wanted to replace some rotting pillars on the front porch of a rental property on Dale Ave. City Staff recommended that the request be denied, since Advocap proposed using treated lumber, which was not consistent with the area's revitalization plan. The Planning Commission agreed, and denied the permit.

Now, maybe you agree with the Planning Commission, and maybe you don't, but before making up your mind, ask yourself this: how would you feel about the decision, if the property owner had been Joe Slumlord? If it were Mr. Slumlord putting in the cheap treated lumber, should that have been approved? Is the only reason you think the City made a mistake is because the applicant was Advocap?

The City's problem is it's not allowed to distinguish between the two. If it's OK for Advocap to use treated lumber on its porches, it's got to be OK for Joe as well. Because letting Advocap do it sets a precedent, that Joe's lawyer will be quick to pounce on if the Planning Commission denies his request after approving Advocap's. You either let both of them use treated lumber, or neither.

Now maybe you think these design guidelines are stupid, and Advocap, Joe, and anyone else should be allowed to do anything they want with their property. Well, maybe not anything. About the time your neighbor sets the third or fourth rusting car on blocks in his back yard, or lets his grass grow 4 feet tall, or turns his garage into a 24/7 retail store, you'll be on the phone complaining to City Hall. We all dislike zoning codes and design guidelines when they keep sensible people like you and me from doing sensible things with our properties, but we all love them when they prevent that numbskull living down the street from ruining the neighborhood.

I think the real issue is, are property values in older neighborhoods better maintained by imposing these restrictions, or not? Yes, Advocap could save a couple hundred bucks by using simpler, cheaper materials to restore their property. And if that were the end of the story, fine. But if that opens the door to other property owners, of whom some may be perhaps not as scrupulous as Advocap, how goes this neighborhood in the long run? And how does that ultimately serve Advocap, and the families it serves?

I don't want to claim that I have the answer to that question. Maybe the bureaucratic meddling is a waste of time, and should be dispensed with. Maybe the regulatory oversight will succeed in propping up property values, and encourage more reinvestment in this neighborhood. Those of you with crystal balls may know which is the true statement; me, I'll just have to wait for time to tell.

Incidentally, even if this bureaucratic meddling is a waste of time, the Planning Commission made the right decision. Its job is to apply the standards it's given, and it did just that. Whether to dispense with the oversight or not should be the Council's decision to make, not the Planning Commission's.

But if that oversight is needed, if rules to restrict the choices of the least civic minded are required, then we have no choice but to apply those same rules to everybody, to Sister Teresa and to Ebenezer Scrooge. And to Advocap. as well.