

June 11, 2018

Dear City Manager Spencer Cronk and Mayor Pro Tem Kathie Tovo,

This letter confirms Hancock Neighborhood Association's support of Preservation Austin Resolution Item 64 to Approve a resolution concerning improvements to the city's Historic Preservation Program to advance program mission and performance objectives.

Austin's rapid growth is resulting in the loss of important and irreplaceable historic assets across the city. As a tourist town and growing visitor destination, historic preservation is more than a matter of casual interest in Austin; it can be a source of economic activity. There is also growing recognition that Austin needs to acknowledge all of its history, including the contributions made by communities of people of color to the city's vibrant culture, often despite legal, economic and social barriers historically placed in the path of these communities.

The Austin City Council recently established the Historic Preservation Fund with revenue from the hotel occupancy tax to provide much-needed investment in heritage tourism and city-owned and private historic sites. These opportunities will be fully realized only with adequate staffing. On February 26, 2018, the Historic Landmark Commission (HLC) passed a resolution recommending the City Council evaluate the current fee structure for historic zoning, recommending additional funding and staffing in the FY2019 budget to enable the Historic Preservation Office (HPO) to identify historic properties, develop design standards and work with communities to develop historic districts. Robust integration of Austin's HPO activities, duties, and responsibilities as part of Austin's planning efforts can only be done with adequate staffing and authority.

The East Austin Historic Resources Survey that the Austin City Council approved in December 2016 identified a number of potential historic landmarks and historic districts with significant architectural and ethnic/cultural heritage. The University of Texas at Austin Gentrification Study team reported to the City's Anti-Displacement Task Force on January 5, 2018, that roughly 3,000 historic age buildings have been demolished in the past five years, many in neighborhoods historically home to persons of color and in lower-income areas with higher concentrations of rental properties. Due to a lack of resources within the HPO and in the community, the City has, to date, received no applications for potential landmark designations or historic districts in the survey area of East Austin. Equitable treatment for the city's historically disadvantaged communities requires an investment in public outreach, assistance, and historic preservation expertise.

Adopted city plans such as Imagine Austin, the Downtown Plan and the Strategic Direction 2023 call for policies and programs that honor and promote the preservation of Austin's historic, cultural, and ethnic heritage. In February 2017, the City Auditor reported several issues preventing the HPO and Historic Landmark Commission (HLC) from achieving their mission to support the preservation of buildings, sites and neighborhoods that reflect elements of Austin's cultural, social, political and architectural history. The audit found that, compared with peer cities, the HLC has the second highest caseload per meeting and the HPO has one of the lowest full-time employee staffing levels among similar programs. Historic preservation offices in other cities facilitate effective planning efforts as well as evaluation and preservation of the city's historic assets.

We recommend that the City Council direct the City Manager to consider the following improvements and return to Council with an analysis on the benefits, feasibility and annual cost of each by June 28, 2018. These improvements should include creation of a separate Preservation Planning Division within the Planning and Zoning Department equal in standing to divisions such as Urban Design and Long-Range Planning to provide the preservation program with a stronger voice in carrying out preservation priorities and efforts to better integrate its activities into the City's planning, equity, and economic development efforts. Goals should include: aligning the HPO staffing levels with peer cities; Revising outdated sections of the Land Development Code related to historic preservation to reflect best practices in the field; funding historic resource survey efforts citywide on an annual basis; posting backup materials for commission and public review at least three business days before HLC meetings; streamlining commission meetings through identification of cases that may be administratively approved; permitting HPO staff to apply for and accept grants in any amount to carry out preservation programming; providing adequate support and training of HPO staff and HLC members by a city attorney with experience in preservation law, or to provide for outside counsel on an as-needed basis, and to review the current historic zoning fee structure to identify opportunities for equity and affordability.

Thank you for your consideration.

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