

Does conservation label help a neighborhood?

Dallas: Study to measure economic impact in 5 designated districts

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By FRANK TREJO / The Dallas Morning News

Rick Garza sees a "night and day" difference in his Kings Highway neighborhood in north Oak Cliff.

When he moved in nearly two decades ago, Kings Highway was on the decline, with dilapidated buildings and major crime problems, Mr. Garza said.

Today, he sees a vibrant community that's on the upswing.

And he believes a major catalyst for the change was the 1988 designation of Kings Highway as the city's first conservation district.

"It wasn't the only thing that happened here, but it was the first tool that was implemented to stop the decay and deterioration," he said. "And it brought interest and awareness to the community that maybe there was something here worth saving."

Conservation districts use building standards to maintain the general character of a neighborhood.

Guidelines, which must be approved by a majority of residents and the city, can include regulations on things such as home setbacks, heights and architectural features. Changes to guidelines require only city staff approval.

The city of Dallas has 14 such districts, and more are being considered. Because of their popularity, Preservation Dallas and the Washington, D.C.-based National Trust for Historic Preservation are sponsoring an economic impact study of five Dallas conservation districts.

The districts – North Cliff, North Bishop Avenue, Kings Highway, Lakewood and Hollywood/Santa Monica – were selected because of their diversity and because they were among the earliest to be named conservation districts.

"Enthusiasm for them is pretty strong," said Dwayne Jones, executive director of Preservation Dallas.

"Conservation districts have become a pretty valuable tool for the city of Dallas that has become a model for a lot of other cities in the country."

Dallas City Council member Angela Hunt, whose council district includes seven conservation districts and three historic districts, said she is pleased that the economic impact study is being conducted.

"I think it's important to have these types of data to show residents that having a conservation district is not only an improvement to their quality of life and helps preserve the character of their neighborhood, but can also provide an economic boost to their property values," Ms. Hunt said.

The study should be completed in about three months. Mr. Jones said he hopes the results will show that conservation districts help communities.

Matt Goebel, vice president of Clarion Associates, the Denver firm that is conducting the study, said it makes good sense to analyze the impact of conservation districts in Dallas because the city's program is so popular.

"This study is the first of its kind in the country," Mr. Goebel said. "There have been a number of studies that have looked at the impact of historic districts, but none have looked at conservation districts."

In general, historic districts are more restrictive than conservation districts. They seek to preserve individual structures as they were when originally built, and changes or alterations require approval from the city staff, a neighborhood task force and the Landmark Commission.

Even though conservation districts continue to grow in popularity, efforts to seek such designations often meet with opposition. Critics contend that they hurt the tax base and limit development, particularly the residential variety.

Two years ago, when some residents of the Gaston/Coronado Hills area of Lakewood sought such a district, other neighbors rejected the effort. One of the opponents was Rick Finlan, who said he believes conservation districts can pit neighbor against neighbor.

"It seems that with current generations, they've developed a feeling of narcissistic entitlement, which says they can control what their neighbor's house looks like," he said.

Mr. Finlan said he believes that some neighborhoods with significant historical architecture should be preserved.

But, he added, aversion to teardowns should not automatically mean a neighborhood should be designated a conservation district.

But Rudy Lopez, who lives in the Hollywood/Santa Monica conservation district in Old East Dallas, said he believes the designation has had a positive effect. He said his neighborhood sought the designation not because the area was in decline, but because residents wanted to preserve the neighborhood's unique character and feel.

"I think our neighborhood has taken the conservation district to heart," Mr. Lopez said. "People feel proud of where they live."

E-mail frejo@dallasnews.com

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