

Strong and Sustainable Neighborhoods An Action Plan for Neighborhood Integrity

Introduction

Neighborhood Integrity or perhaps more to the point, the desire for strong neighborhoods meeting the demand for housing and contributing positively to the quality of life experienced in College Station, has been at the forefront of community discussions for some time. Indeed, one could argue that the desire to build and maintain strong neighborhoods closely integrated with the University was the very basis for the formation of the city itself.

As the home of Texas A&M University, College Station is home to thousands of university students. As the University continues its growth and expansion, the community has the opportunity to accommodate an increasing number of students in off campus housing. Our challenge is to welcome the increasing number of students while retaining the strength and vitality of our neighborhoods.

Among the challenges before us are; first our housing stock is aging resulting in maintenance requirements and often leading to investment ownership and renter occupation in traditional single family neighborhoods. Second, there are issues which manifest themselves in our residential neighborhoods as a result increased number of units being available for rent – parking, trash, poorly maintained housing, and noise. Third, homeowners view the transition of homes in their neighborhoods into rentals as intrusive and unwelcome change. Finally, current market conditions will likely see additional housing constructed to accommodate the student rental market.

Objective of this Action Plan

Strong and Sustainable Neighborhoods – An Action Plan for Neighborhood Integrity has a threefold objective:

1. Gain an understanding of the issues and present a policy rationale for strong and sustainable neighborhoods.
2. Identify existing neighborhood integrity efforts employed in the City of College Station.
3. Recommend specific policy initiative(s) to enhance existing efforts.

Rationale for Strong and Sustainable Neighborhoods

Neighborhoods are the basic building blocks of our city. Neighborhoods are where we live, raise our families, and socialize with our friends and neighbors. In many ways our city is only as strong and sustainable as our neighborhoods. Our neighborhoods are a collection of varying housing types with an increasingly diverse occupancy composition. There are greater than 34,000 dwelling units (including all housing types except “group quarters”) in College Station. The majority of these dwelling units are renter occupied, though the majority of single family homes remain owner occupied.

In 2000 it was estimated that nearly 75% of the single family homes located in College Station were owner occupied. Still more than 5,000 single family homes are occupied by renters. Further, the majority of dwelling units are occupied by non-family households, that is households functioning as a family but not related to one another. In 2000 it was estimated that approximately 60% of all households were composed of non-related individuals.

College Station citizens have been clear in their desire to promote strong and sustainable neighborhoods. Throughout the Comprehensive Plan update, citizens voiced their support for efforts that protect neighborhood integrity. The Comprehensive Plan Advisory Committee (CPAC) has addressed this specifically through establishing working goals for the Comprehensive Plan update that state “Strong, unique neighborhoods...” and “Long-term viability and appeal of established neighborhoods”.

For the purposes of this action plan we have adopted the working goal of

Protect and Strengthen College Station neighborhoods resulting in distinct neighborhoods that welcome homeowners, renters, students and others, maintain their viability over time and enhance the overall quality of life for our citizens.

Strong and sustainable neighborhoods are too important to leave to piece-meal solutions implemented to address what is portrayed as the current crisis. Strong and sustainable neighborhoods demand the best we have to offer; that is a thoughtful and comprehensive policy approach that contributes positively to the quality of life for all that call College Station home.

The City Council directed the City Manager at its November 19, 2007 Council meeting to proceed with developing a holistic response to issues being confronted by College Station neighborhoods. Since receiving direction from the Council, the following actions have been undertaken:

- Convened a 35+ member engagement panel consisting of homeowners, students, realtors/investors, TAMU administration and city staff
- Conducted two – day long engagement sessions to identify issues and possible solutions
- Conducted a review of best practices from other major university communities
- Conducted a review of existing codes, ordinances, and organizational practices of the City of College Station to identify gaps, inconsistencies, and potential areas of modification
- Established an interactive web page discussing neighborhood integrity

Challenges Before Us

Given the current and anticipated future environment, the City government is being called to provide leadership in the critical area of Neighborhood Integrity. The Council has recognized the need to be proactive articulating through its Strategic Plan several policy directives and initiatives related to neighborhood integrity. This proposed Plan of Action attempts to quantify and offer the Council and community specific direction to move the organization and community towards a positive response to our present and future conditions.

As we address the challenges presented by enhancing the quality of our neighborhoods, providing protection to homeowners, and providing a welcoming home to our university students, we must acknowledge it is a shared responsibility by the entire community – City government, resident homeowners, students, investor-property managers, and University administration. We will not be successful without the full involvement of each key stakeholder to contribute towards the solution.

The City government must take a leadership role to bring together the key stakeholders. We must position ourselves to implement strategies and programs to enhance the quality of life and stabilize neighborhoods in transition. There must be a full recognition that we have limitations. We must strike a clear balance between actions appropriately belonging with City government and actions which more appropriately belong to other key stakeholders.

The proposed Plan of Action should be viewed as a beginning point and not an end unto itself. The proposed plan presents several key strategies, programs, and actions which represents our best efforts to understand the problem and offer meaningful responses to address the identified problems.

Emphasis Areas, Proposed Strategies and Actions

Emphasis Areas

- Adapt current service delivery system (planning, code enforcement, outreach, etc) to have a greater orientation toward neighborhoods.
- Enhanced use of regulatory and enforcement tools currently available to the City
- Full engagement of all stakeholders in the solution

1.0 Strategy

Improve the capacity of neighborhoods to deal with a myriad of planning and quality of life issues including those resulting from an aging housing stock and an increase in the number of rental units.

One of the many challenges we face is the recognition that we have aging housing stock in the community. As the housing stock ages, it is frequently converted to rental units in previously owner occupied single family neighborhoods or falls into disrepair. Our strategy suggests that we should be proactive in addressing this issue through multiple actions.

- 1.1 Action Re-establish the neighborhood planning program and ensure that the efforts compliment the comprehensive plan and are closely aligned with City objectives to stabilize and enhance neighborhoods. Our Neighborhood Planning efforts should focus on developing neighborhood specific strategies and protections to promote neighborhood stabilization, appearance, public infrastructure, and compatible land use.
 - 1.2 Action Promote home ownership through various programs managed by the City for first time home buyers to increase homeownership in targeted neighborhoods. Home ownership is a key to neighborhood stabilization.
 - 1.3 Action Use adopted property maintenance codes and ordinances to enhance property maintenance. We need to better use existing legislation to promote neighborhood pride and appearance.
- 2.0 Strategy** Orient service delivery toward neighborhoods and enhance the City's enforcement tools to better address the rental market.
- 2.1 Action Establish a single point of responsibility in the City organization oriented to addressing neighborhood issues and coordination of all City programs. One of the weaknesses identified through this process was the identification of multiple points of entry into the City processes. This can be both confusing and time consuming for citizens with legitimate concerns.
 - 2.2 Action Conduct intensive neighborhood enforcement programs in select neighborhoods for code compliance. This is a multi-functional approach to address transitional neighborhoods. If a neighborhood association is not present work to develop an association. Provide education programs as well as enforcement activities. Bring together key stakeholders to identify needs of the neighborhood and use the array of tools provided in this plan to address the concerns.
 - 2.3 Action Promote the formation and registration of neighborhood associations and enhance their effectiveness. Perhaps one of the best ways that a neighborhood can partner with the city and others ensuring that neighborhoods remain strong and sustainable is to form a neighborhood association and to get it registered with the city. This organizational structure allows us to address issues in a systematic manner and enables the city to readily engage neighborhood. Certain services offered by the city can only be reasonably offered at this level.
 - 2.4 Action Implement Universal Rental Registration Program. All single family rental properties should be registered at no cost to the property owner. The registration should be minimally intrusive and should be easy to complete. The information collected should include a mandatory local point of contact and the current number and names of tenants on the lease.

Registrations should be renewed annually and should coincide with the University calendar. This always creates an opportunity to present information to tenants about city codes, neighborhood activities, and the educational programs offered by the city.

2.5 Action Landlords and property investors should be encouraged to adopt model leases which provide protections to landlords to deal with difficult situations. The model lease is in place with a number of properties already in the city with good results. The City and Landlord Associations should through its education efforts strongly suggest the adoption of the model lease to provide landlords with the tools to address problem properties.

2.6 Action Enhance development standards. Dense small lot development (i.e., developments that are susceptible to conversion to rental units) should have higher development standards including no parking zones concurrent upon recording of the plat, designated overflow parking areas, mandatory alleys, off-street parking tied to # of bedrooms, maximum lot coverage, etc. These standards could be lessened or waived if the development is subjected to a zoning prohibition against two or more unrelated individuals residing in the homes.

2.7 Action Improve data collection on neighborhood problems and challenges. Better use of the city's web site and GIS to collect data on neighborhood problems should be implemented. Better collection of data related to violations, including mapping, data bases, etc. to aid in identifying trends and "hot spots" to permit proactive action by the City in addressing the issues and concerns.

3.0 Strategy Educate key stakeholders and community. One of the critical needs is to provide continuous education of key stakeholders on the need to have strong viable neighborhoods.

3.1 Action Fully implement the Aggieland Solution program presented by TAMU student leadership. This is a proactive program which benefits the entire community.

3.2 Action Work with University Administration to apply the Aggie Code of Honor and other codes of conduct and behavior to off campus activities. This will provide an additional support system to assist students in transitioning to life in the community at large and promote good citizenship.

3.3 Action Work with University Administration to educate students upon arrival on Campus to understand community standards and expectations. There is a gap between students understanding local standards and expectations which can be met during orientation sessions when they arrive on campus to begin their college work.

- 3.4 Action Develop and implement “Howdy Neighbor” program as a direct outreach by neighborhood associations to welcome new residents to their neighborhoods. There are several good examples already in place within the community in which neighborhood associations provide new residents with informational packets to help them transition into the neighborhood. This program needs to be expanded and implemented by Neighborhood Associations.
- 3.5 Action The City government should develop a comprehensive training and education program to assist key stakeholders to address the many facets of this Plan of Action. The city should become the reservoir of materials, information, and programs to assist students, neighborhood associations, individual citizens, and landlords to obtain information to assist them in developing a positive response to Neighborhood Integrity issues.
- 3.6 Action Establish performance measures that address programmatic accomplishments, outputs, and outcomes. These measures should be grounded in this action plan and other adopted Council plans and policies and should be use to determine the success of the various efforts identified in this plan.

4.0 Strategy Provide for additional enforcement tools to address Neighborhood Integrity issues. This plan suggests a number of specific proposals to address Neighborhood Integrity.

- 4.1 Action Amend the City code to codify that any property that receives three verified actions (i.e., written warnings, citations, etc) in a period of one year (that is the registration cycle) will be considered a nuisance property and procedures for enforcement as provided by Local Government Code will be initiated by the City. Failure to have a property properly registered at the time of a verified complaint shall constitute a verified action in itself. Once a property has been declared a nuisance property a zero tolerance policy will be employed for a period of at least one year, meaning that subsequent verified actions will result in mandatory levying of applicable citations and fines.
- 4.2 Action Amend the City code to codify host responsibilities for parties in residential areas. This should clearly outline who is responsible for what and what the potential consequences will be for failure to meet these expectations. This information could be made a part of what is delivered to the tenants during the rental registration process.
- 4.3 Action Adopt a mediation procedure to resolve areas of disagreement between various parties involving Neighborhood Integrity issues. The mediation procedure is suggested by the Aggieland Solution and merits implementation.

Unrelated Individuals

A great deal of discussion has centered around the issue of the permitted number of unrelated individuals allowed to reside in a single dwelling unit. Currently the City regulates this number at four per unit. It is the staff's belief that the afore-described action plan can succeed with or without adjustment in the permitted number of unrelated individuals. If Council elects to reduce the permitted number of unrelated individuals, staff continues to recommend all of the identified actions contained in this plan. If Council elects to reduce the permitted number of unrelated individuals it is recommended that such a provision apply only to neighborhoods that succeed in securing the support of at least 60% of the property owners located in a plat or phase of a plat. It is also important to remember that any such action will not eliminate the non-conforming (or grandfathered) status of properties currently housing four unrelated individuals.

Conclusions

A real opportunity exists in College Station. An opportunity to demonstrate how a community can welcome thousands of students, address an aging housing stock, and build strong and sustainable neighborhoods. This opportunity will not be without its challenges, but then few things that are worth doing come without challenges. This opportunity requires a clear focus, tailored solutions, and the commitment of all partners. Implementation of this action plan will result in strong and sustainable neighborhoods that continue to make College Station a great place to call home for homeowner, renter, and student alike!