

440
6/8/2004

May 28, 2004

Council Member Betty Dunkerley
City of Austin
Post Office Box 1088
Austin, TX 78767-8865

Dear Council Member Dunkerley,

The Heritage Society of Austin commends the Council and the Preservation Task Force for proactively addressing the issue of tax abatement for historic properties as more and more properties seek tax abatement. We understand the need to focus abatement on those properties that directly enrich the cultural environment of our City.

The Heritage Society believes strongly that good preservation means a better city, one in which the economy is stronger, tax receipts from tourism are increased, and skilled jobs are created for gifted preservationists and contractors. Therefore, the encouragement of preservation of our public buildings should always remain a priority in public policy.

We have followed the Task Force and attended its meetings. Many important issues have been discussed, and we agree with the resolution of many of these issues. We support the process and wish to thank those involved.

While we agree with the large majority of the Task Force recommendations, we do not support a few. While we would prefer no percentage reduction in the basis for establishing abatement, we support the recommendation given the budget concerns. For your consideration, we have listed those points which we ask the Council to consider as an alternate approach:

- We believe tax incentives should be available only to properties with Landmark Status and those considered by the City as contributing to a Historic District. We disagree with the Task Force on the issue, because tax incentives should go only to those properties with historic and/or preservation value, rather than to any property in a district regardless of its architectural historic value.

- We believe strongly that all members of a newly constituted Landmark Commission should meet some basic qualification of experience and expertise in the area of preservation.
- We believe tax incentives for low-income homeowners are best addressed through the response gentrification study. The Task Force took no vote on this issue, after extensive discussion, but there was a minority report of this issue. The minimal tax incentive suggested may not be the best means of accomplishing either public policy goals or those of good preservation and support for low-income homeowners. Development of low or no interest loan programs is a much more effective approach, and other tools are available.
- We encourage the City to work proactively on establishing local Historic Districts for which the City can evaluate and set standards. It is important for preservation to become more proactive in Austin rather than reactive, which frustrates everyone involved. By setting boundaries and standards on all sides of the issues we can understand the ground rules and avoid being blindsided unnecessarily.

Thank you for your interest in preserving Austin.

With appreciation,

Dealey Herndon
President

CC: Toby Hammett Futrell