

## Whose History is Worth Preserving?

People all over Austin want City Departments, staff and Board/Commission designees to operate in a neutral, fair, non-biased manner. People want City systems to be reliable and predictable. Equally important and a value held by Council Members is to encourage residents to participate in public hearings before proposed actions are taken.

The above value was not the case during Monday night's meeting of the City of Austin's Historic Landmark Commission. The meeting was a textbook example of how not to ensure public participation. In my opinion, it was an example of how privilege and power impact systems, policies and procedures of the City.

A bit of history for perspective is important. Rosewood Courts, built in 1939, was one of the first public housing properties in America built with federal funds for "working-class individuals." The land, "Emancipation Park," owned by Americans of African descent for Juneteenth celebrations, was taken by eminent domain to construct the landmark housing.

Austin is known for preserving as much of its structural history as possible. Item #5 on Monday night's agenda should have been a slam dunk - to preserve an iconic structure. Rosewood Courts speaks to the vanishing presence of Americans of African descent in the only part of Austin that they could call home, after the City adopted the 1928 Comprehensive Plan.

In my estimation, the process Monday night was flawed. The proponents of the historic designation of Rosewood Courts were told that the item would be #2 on the Commission's agenda. On Monday night's official agenda, the historic property had moved to Item #5. However, agenda Item #7 was taken before the staff's presentation on Rosewood Courts. It was after 10 p.m. before the discussion on Rosewood Courts began.

Not adhering to the agenda can be seen as a delaying tactic in an effort to limit public participation. People who have children or work find it difficult to sit from 7 p.m. to midnight to participate and listen to discussions prior to a vote.

In this case, City staff did not support historic designation even though staff agreed the property and the structures met the criteria for Landmark designation. Not only did staff not support the designation, staff went on record in support of the Housing

Authority's "plan" to demolish all but a token number of Rosewood Courts units.

The issue for me is: "Why would staff not support the nomination of a site that by their own admission clearly met the criteria for Landmark designation?"

I must ask myself and my community a fundamental question: "Whose history is worth preserving?"