



Bicyclists pedal past a new house that was under construction last month in the 1600 block of James Avenue. PHOTO BY BRAD STAUFFER

New limits on height, size of homes may not end teardown controversy

BY JANE MCCLURE

The St. Paul City Council's adoption on July 22 of a new ordinance reducing the maximum height and size of new and remodeled homes in the Highland Park and Macalester-Groveland neighborhoods is being viewed by advocates of housing preservation as just the first step in an ongoing effort to discourage the teardown of original homes and their replacement by houses that are out of character with the rest of the neighborhood.

The new ordinance will take effect 30 days after its publication. While that may be too late for the residents of blocks where new or remodeled homes are already under construction, others are hoping that the new regulations will prevent the construction of large houses that overshadow neighboring homes and take up much of their city lot.

The new design standards reduce the maximum height of new houses from 30 feet at the top of the sidewalk to 26, 24 or 22 feet, depending on the property's residential zoning. The maximum lot coverage of new homes has been reduced from 35 percent for the principal structure and 35 percent of the backyard for any accessory structures to a total of 40 percent for the principal structure and any accessory structures.

The new lot coverage limit should reduce the footprint of new houses, according to city planner Mike Richardson, who helped draft the ordinance. For example, on a city lot measuring 40 by 128 feet (including half of the

On a city lot measuring 40 by 128 feet, or 5,120 square feet, the total footprint of a house and any accessory buildings is limited to 2,048 feet under the new regulations. Under the old standards, the total footprint was limited to 2,450 square feet.

tract ordinance for St. Paul.

Conservation districts are a way to preserve neighborhoods without the more complex regulations of a local or national historic preservation district, according to Bethany Gladhill, a local consultant on historic preservation. "It's definitely something St. Paul should look at," she said. The districts can be set up to allow homeowners to opt in or opt out, she said.

Putting new conservation district regulations in place could take several months through the normal channels of St. Paul Planning Commission and Heritage Preservation Commission reviews. However, City Council member Dave Thune was able to bypass those commissions when he introduced regulations allowing for the reuse of historic structures. The City Council could do that with conservation districts, too, he said.

Local residents are also considering asking the city to impose a moratorium on the demolition of single-family homes until further

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The new design standards reduce the maximum height of new houses from 30 feet at the top of the sidewall to 26, 24 or 22 feet, depending on the property's residential zoning. The maximum lot coverage of new homes has been reduced from 35 percent for the principal structure and 35 percent of the backyard for any accessory structures to a total of 40 percent for the principal structure and any accessory structures.

The new lot coverage limit should reduce the footprint of new houses, according to city planner Mike Richardson, who helped draft the ordinance. For example, on a city lot measuring 40 by 128 feet (including half of the width of the alley), or 5,120 square feet, the total footprint of a new house and any accessory buildings is limited to 2,048 feet under the new regulations. Under the old standards, the total footprint of the house and all accessory buildings was limited to 2,450 square feet.

Also, if any side of the new house is longer than 35 feet, it will have to be broken up with recesses, bays or other architectural features that are at least 1 foot deep and 6 feet long. That will also reduce the size of the house, if only slightly.

Developers can still apply for variances to the new regulations, Richardson noted, and houses that are set back further from the side property line will be allowed to be 1 foot higher for every 1 foot of additional setback.

Though the new height and lot coverage limits may discourage developers from replacing existing homes with new ones, several local preservation groups believe that more needs to be done to preserve the historic character of St. Paul neighborhoods.

The residents of Macalester-Groveland's Tangletown area who waged a successful fight to save a century-old house at 1721 Princeton Ave. from being torn down earlier this year are considering applying for conservation district status for Tangletown. To accomplish that, however, the group needs to convince the City Council to adopt a conservation dis-

trict ordinance for St. Paul.

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Local residents are also considering asking the city to impose a moratorium on the demolition of single-family homes until further protections can be put into place. Last week, the Save Our St. Paul Neighborhoods group rolled out a citywide "Stop the Teardowns!" lawn sign campaign.

The St. Paul Department of Planning and Economic Development, the nonprofit Historic St. Paul and other preservation groups are also considering lobbying for neighborhood-specific density standards and other new measures to preserve a neighborhood's character. In Summit Hill, a working group has discussed conducting an historic survey as a first step in seeking historic preservation status for that neighborhood.

Ward 3 City Council member Chris Tolbert said he is open to looking at other ideas. "I know the (teardown) issue is reaching other parts of the city," he said. "We've learned that it's a really difficult issue."

Though city officials appreciate the investments developers are making in neighborhoods, Tolbert said, they are also sympathetic to the problems caused by teardowns and the construction of larger new homes.

One of the ongoing challenges for the city will be enforcement, according to Tolbert. He said he has talked to administrators in the city's Department of Safety and Inspections and will be supporting their request for an additional half-time building inspector in the 2016 city budget.