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Haithcock promises to stall X/O, again

Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance files complaint over highrise

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LaGrange Architects The X/O development is still eliciting controversy in the South Loop.
Image courtesy of Lucien

Second Ward Alderman Madeline Haithcock told members of the newly formed Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance Monday night that she is putting the brakes on construction of the X/O residential high-rise towers planned for 18th and Prairie.

But some of the group's members were skeptical, since the city already has approved the planned development allowing the two towers to be built, and developers Keith and Brian Giles have started selling the building's roughly 500 units.

The project would include two ultra-modern towers of glass and steel, one standing 45 stories high and the other 33 stories.

The Prairie District group, which formed primarily to fight the tower project, argues that the buildings are too tall and don't fit in with the historic Victorian homes in the neighborhood.

Haithcock said that although the planned development has been approved, she could still hold the project up by rezoning the area or stalling the project's permits.

Prairie District member John Jacoby told the group that Haithcock made the same promise to community members at a meeting in 2006 and then later supported the project in City Hall.

"We had a community meeting at Glessner House last summer and we made it clear to the alderman at that point that we didn't want that tower, and the alderman told us that this project is going to be stopped in its tracks, and they're going to go back to the drawing board," Jacoby said. "And then a month later the city council approved it, so obviously we don't have any real impact."

Haithcock declined to respond to questions following the meeting and became defensive with the group after Jacoby questioned her vote to approve the project.

"No matter what my vote was then, I'm working with you now," she said. "If you don't want me to work with you, then say so. I'm trying to work with you to get it changed. I didn't have to come here. Coming here is not going to do me any good if everybody's going to jump on me."

Jeff Ayersman, a Prairie District board member, said the group has filed paperwork with the city challenging the legality of the project. He said the complaint notes that neighbors weren't adequately notified about the project, that the buildings would be too tall and that the sewer system in the area is not adequate for the building.

"Forty-five stories doesn't seem too consistent with the rest of the Prairie District," Ayersman said. "Why are the taxpayers paying for [sewer upgrades] when the developer's the one putting you over the tipping point?"

Bob McKenna with the Chicago Department of Planning and Development said at the meeting that the developers could build a shorter building under the current zoning, but it would be a denser structure.

"People say they don't want a 40-story building, but I'm wondering what is the alternative you want to get instead of that," McKenna said. "It doesn't matter what I feel about it. I may like or not like it and it doesn't matter. What matters is whether they fit with the zoning code, which they clearly do."

He said some might not like the way the building looks, but the city does not regulate style, since the structure is not in an historic district.

"A lot of architects would say the way to treat appropriately a historic district is to do something that is not like a fake historic building that would diminish the history of the area but to do something totally different, so that it's not trying to mimic historic architecture," he said.

Haithcock said she is prepared to rezone the area to stop the development, but she said such a move would likely trigger a lawsuit by the developers.

"You've got to remember, Keith and his brother are very stubborn," Haithcock said. "They think they own this whole thing because they started out doing development in the South Loop, so it's hard to tell them that they can't, but I can get someone to tell them that will make a difference."

Developer Brian Giles declined an interview for the story.

Although the Prairie District group opposes the project, other organizations, including the Near South Planning Board have supported the project.

Dennis Beninato, president of the Greater South Loop Association, which covers a larger geographic area than the PDNA, said his group has not taken an official position on the development, but it did send a letter to the city last year that was favorable toward the project.

He said his group is holding another meeting with the developers on March 17 to discuss recent changes to the proposal.

"They eliminated the town homes on the south side of the building," he said. "And now that the alderman is saying she has put a hold on the permits, I want to inform folks about what's going on."