

## NEWS

# Austin residents object to proposed three-flat on vacant lot

*Say they're concerned about traffic, density, renters' behavior*

**AUSTIN WEEKLY news** by **Igor Studenkov**  
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Rendering of the proposed three-flat | Provided by A-Z Builders

A proposal to build a pair of three-flats on a vacant lot at 237 N. Menard Ave. got pushback from neighbors who worried the new development would bring more traffic and density to a block largely made up of single-family homes.

Wheeling-based A-Z Builders, which previously built five three-flats on lots throughout Austin, is looking to build two more. Each would have a smaller, two-bedroom unit at the basement level and two three-bedroom units on the first and second floors. Developer **Adam Zegarski** said it would operate like a traditional Chicago multi-flat – the buyer would live in one of the units and rent out the rest.

While the developer can build houses of that size by right, building three-flats requires a zoning change. During a June 7 ward community meeting, which was held at Columbus Park Refectory, 5701 W. Jackson Blvd., developers described the project as a way to preserve affordable housing, create opportunities for multi-generational housing in the community and create extra property tax revenue for the city. But the residents of the block said that, while they supported housing on the lot, they would rather see single-family homes.

The property has long been vacant, and several residents who attended the community meeting complained that it hasn't been well-maintained. According to Cook County records, the city purchased the lot in 1996 as the previous owner struggled to pay off city debts. Effective April 25, 2016, the city sold the land to Gugly Inc – a corporate entity owned by Oak Park real estate broker Gregory Sorg.

According to Cedrick Hunter, A-Z's broker who is based in north Austin, the developer is currently in the process of buying the land, but the sale was contingent on the zoning change.

Chicago aldermen traditionally had veto power over any zoning changes within their wards. Ald. Chris Taliaferro (29<sup>th</sup> Ward) said he wanted to hear from the community after many neighbors came to his ward night, where constituents can talk to him one-on-one.

A-Z Builders' attorney Agnieszka "Agnes" Plecka said Zegarski is trying to do something rare in modern development and that he believes there is demand for new three-flat units with modern amenities, something that would fit well with existing homes and provide opportunities for either multi-generational housing or for the homeowners to earn extra money by renting.

"The only difference [from what's allowed under the current zoning] is, instead of having a huge house, that building will have three affordable, beautiful apartments," she said. "That's the essence of our proposed zoning change.

A May 2021 DePaul University Institute For Housing Studies **report on the state of 2-to-4 flats in Chicago** described such homes as playing “a unique and critical role in Chicago’s overall housing supply by providing affordable rental housing, homeownership, and wealth-building opportunities.” It raised an alarm about this type of housing getting converted into single-family homes and reducing the affordable housing supply.

“More than any other type of rental housing in Chicago, 2-to-4-unit properties are the most likely to offer lower-cost rents and family-sized units and these units make up a substantial portion of the housing supply in Chicago communities of color, particularly the city’s Latinx communities,”

Hunter sought to allay concerns about absentee landlords.

“Ninety percent of the buildings that we sold have been owner-occupied, so the owner has a vested interest in the community,” he said.

But most of the residents in attendance weren’t convinced. Augustus Sharp, who lives north of the lot, was among several residents who raised concerns. He questioned the fact that each building will have rear parking that can fit six cars.

“Personally, I don’t want to see two buildings, three floors there,” he said. “We don’t have a lot of traffic, a lot of trouble [on our block]. Right now, it’s peaceful, and I would like to keep it that way.”

Marianne Jackson, who lives a few houses south of the site, said she was worried about the development’s impact, noting that families could have many children. She was one of several neighbors who worried about tenants taking in people who are not on the lease.

“I did a rough count of people who live in the buildings on that side of the street -you’re only talking about 18 to 20 people,” Jackson said. “You’re talking about building the structures where there could be that many people in those structures.”

She also worried that allowing a zoning change for this site could pave the way for other property owners requesting zoning changes further down the line.

“There’s a six-flat on that corner at the 100 block, and we got problem over there all the time,” Jackson said. “We got people sitting on the stoop, running their mouth, partying.”

Hunter said the development team would take the feedback into account, adding that, as a resident of the 29<sup>th</sup> Ward, he wouldn’t be involved in a development that would harm the neighborhood.

“You guys are all together, and you’re coming out to oppose the development – it’s really good that you’re all a cohesive unit,” he said. “I would go back to my group and consider our options.”

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