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Dear Client:

The City of Austin legal staff is busy drafting an ordinance that would require local home builders to add costly improvements to each new home. Depending upon its final form, it could raise the cost of the average Austin home and, some complain, be an unacceptable, intrusive form of government.

As always, the devil is in the details. Just how far will the proposed ordinance go? For instance, will it mandate that **all of the stringent requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)** be included in all new private single-family homes built in Austin, or will it adopt lesser requirements of a voluntary program already underway in Texas? And some feel that **any ordinance is a basic infringement on private property rights.**

The buzz word for this homebuilding approach is “visitability.” It’s a term associated with “universal design.” And it is an approach that is gaining a bit of traction here and elsewhere. But should it be mandatory or voluntary?

A Texas organization offers a **voluntary certification for homebuilders who adopt its limited approach to making homes visitable** to everyone and providing the opportunity for homeowners to age in place should they decide to do so. It is called Easy Living Home Texas (www.easylivinghometexas.org). And some local builders, such as Zbranek Custom Homes, have already signed on.

Its requirements for certification are: 1) **Easy Access** with a step-free entrance, 2) **Easy Passage** because the exterior door that provides the step-free entrance, and every interior passage door on the main level (including bathrooms), provides ample clear passage space, and 3) **Easy Use** with no less than one bedroom, a kitchen, some entertainment area, and at least one full bathroom with sufficient maneuvering space – all on the main floor. That’s it.

The folks at Easy Living Home Texas say its certification enhances both the initial and resale value of a home and is achievable for practically any new home regardless of price, building site or architecture. But the basic question is **whether this approach to homebuilding should be made mandatory through the city ordinance process, or left to individual choice.** Make no mistake, the Austin City Council is serious about this issue. Remember, in 1998, Austin passed the first ordinance in Texas requiring the use of universal design in new housing *built with public financial assistance*. The proposed visitability ordinance goes another step further.

The headline this week read “Austin area home sales fall for 10th month in a row.” While accurate, it didn’t tell the whole story. And the whole story is much more telling.

First you have to start with a bit of perspective. Did you know that last year and the year before were the two strongest years for Austin-area home sales – ever? **In other words, after back-to-back years of record strength, you would expect – especially in the midst of the *national* home crisis and the subsequent tightening of credit requirements everywhere – the Austin market would begin to soften.** With the clamps cranked down on credit, fewer people are able to qualify for home loans. Predictable, yes. A local crisis, no.

So, yes, while sales have been tapering off, it should be pointed out this is the time of year when more and more homes are put on the market (school’s out and summertime is the biggest moving season of the year). In fact, **the number of homes with For Sale signs in the front yard jumped 20% over last year when record sales occurred.** More than 10,000 homes are for sale in the Austin area.

What does this mean? It means *buyers* – those who can qualify under the more-stringent credit requirements – will have **more options**. It means that *sellers* will need to be more **realistic about setting market-driven prices**.

Meantime, prices of the homes that have been selling continue to rise with each report. But, the median prices are rising at a *measured* rate – up 2% from last year to settle in April at \$187,900. This is a good thing in that the metros where the housing crisis was the most devastating, home prices skyrocketed and then plummeted from the unjustified sales values. **Austin homes, while increasing in value, have maintained a steady pace that kept a housing bubble (that would ultimately burst) from forming.** Austin’s home market is still solid.

A Texas economist quoted quite regularly here on real estate issues is fearless when it comes to stating his opinions on statewide issues other than real estate. We have two examples.

The chief economist at TexasA&M’s Real Estate Center, **Mark Dotzour**, tracks real estate in Texas daily and we quote him frequently. But since real estate does not operate in a vacuum, he ventures opinions about other issues – even those that are marked by controversy.

Take the massive Trans-Texas Corridor project that would cut wide swaths across Texas for freeways, rail, power lines, etc. **“We need a Texas Corridor desperately,”** he says. With a projected 13 million people coming to Texas by 2030, he told a Bell County audience the state needs more infrastructure to help ensure continued economic growth. He also said **making corn ethanol is “absolutely wrecking our economy.** You put a third of our corn crop in the gas tank, and what happens? Corn goes up. Wheat goes up. Rice goes up. Oil goes up. The value of the dollar goes to nothing and gasoline’s \$3.50.” So how do you really feel, Mark?

If you give money to panhandlers standing around Austin intersections, are you paying people to be panhandlers? Those who feel this way in other cities have come up with an interesting approach.

The jury is still out on whether the approach will be successful because so few cities have implemented this strategy. In a nutshell, here is what it's all about. Cities as diverse as Baltimore, Denver and Portland, OR have placed **old parking meters** at key points around the city.

The idea is those who wish to help the homeless can drop money into the meters, instead of giving to the individual panhandlers. The money thus collected is given to various groups that provide services to the homeless. And givers don't have to worry about money given directly to the panhandlers going for drugs or drink.

Those who *support* this approach say the reason **people are panhandling is because there is a market for panhandling.** Those who *oppose* the meter idea raise questions such as **"Will cities never give up on ways to make the lives of homeless people harder?"**

In other words, this approach is controversial. And, so far, the cities that have implemented this approach report there has been **less panhandling, but not a lot of cash has been collected.**

Even San Francisco, a city noted for its permissive policies, is currently considering this approach. SanFran, however, has not yet taken a final vote on whether to institute this method of dealing with panhandling.

A program to generate more engineers and scientists, pioneered ten years ago here in Austin, is turning out to be a national model that is being replicated across the nation.

This program started with a basic premise: to make K-12 kids want to pursue higher education or careers involving math and science, you need to **entice more math and science whizzes in college to teach in K-12 schools.** And you need to excite the college students with a *unique method of teaching* based on educational research showing how students best learn math and science skills. Thus, UTeach at UTAustin was born.

UTAustin math and science majors are aggressively recruited to join UTeach and they are provided with an easy path to teacher certification. While they are undergrads, the math and science majors start working with K-12 kids in public school classrooms. The program is enticing more students to go into teaching despite relatively low pay. The profound impact of UTeach has led a number of universities to emulate the program. California-Berkeley, Colorado, Kansas, Louisiana State, Florida and Temple are examples.

Is the first person to reach 150 years old alive today? A longevity expert in Texas thinks so and has made a bet to that effect. If he wins, he (or his heirs) will pocket millions of dollars.

It's common knowledge that **people are living much longer these days** than they did just a few decades ago. There are a lot of reasons for this development. Some examples: people are choosing healthier lifestyles, good genes are being passed to each generation, and medical and pharmaceutical advances have greatly aided in diminishing the effects of disease on longevity.

A nationally-acclaimed Texas scholar and researcher is convinced that the **first person to live to be 150 years old is alive today**. **Dr. Steven Austad**, a professor of cellular and structural biology at the Barshop Center for Longevity and Aging Studies at the UT Health Science Center – San Antonio, has dedicated more than two decades of his own life working to extend the human lifespan.

He is so convinced, as a result of his research and studies, that a 150-year-old person is possible he has bet his reputation on it. **He made a very public bet of \$150 that a 150-year-old person will be alive on earth in 2150**. He and his colleague put the \$300 into a fund that will grow into several millions of dollars by 2150. Austad says he hopes to be alive to collect the winnings, but if he doesn't make it, he hopes his heirs will enjoy the fruits of his winnings.

While the *bet* may seem a frivolous stunt, his *research* is anything but frivolous. **His studies have a very important scientific and medical goal**. It's not just longevity he is after. What he hopes will happen as the general population lives longer and longer is that there will be parallel successes to **push back the onset of health problems that affect those in later life – such as heart disease and Alzheimer's**. After all, what good is *living* longer if it only means you will be *sicker* longer? It will be interesting to track his progress – if you live long enough!

Speaking of medical progress, **Dr. Louis Overholster** noted a recent study pointed out one-in-four Americans suffer daily pain. So he posed the question: what do you say to someone who is on so much medication? He answered his own question: "May I have your autograph, Ms. Abdul?"

Sincerely



Editor/Publisher