

Three cheers for walkable development

New urbanism equals new freedom

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The best trend in Houston? It's the growing number of urban projects being developed inside Loop 610: high-density, mixed-use places where it's possible to do stuff without getting in your car.

As Chronicle reporter Nancy Sarnoff reported last week, PM Realty Group plans to build a high-rise development on five acres at 3333 Richmond. It'll include offices, upscale apartments and full-grown live oaks ("Urban vision takes root," Page A1, Nov. 28).

Among other projects already underway: Regent Square, a compact neighborhood near downtown planned so that residents can live, work, shop and eat out without putting a key in the ignition.

We expect these developments to find a hungry market. This year's Kinder Houston Area Survey revealed that, at long last, Houstonians are falling out of love with the spread-out suburbs. In 1999, 52 percent of Anglos living inside the city said when polled that they'd like to move to the suburbs someday; only 26 percent of those in the suburbs said they'd like to move to the city. But this year, urban life took the lead: Only 28 percent of city residents said they'd like to move to the 'burbs; 33 percent of suburbanites said they'd like to move to the city.

The problem now is where to put those would-be urbanites. Even inside Loop 610, much of Houston remains unwalkable, car-centric and otherwise old-style suburban; and the city's one-size-fits-all development codes actually discourage the creation of walkable neighborhoods.

We applaud PM Realty Group and other developers who go out of their way to provide Houstonians the city life that many of us crave. And we urge City Council to think hard about the city that our development and parking codes are creating.

For decades in Houston, cars represented freedom. But in these trafficky days, for many of us, freedom means not having to crank the ignition.

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