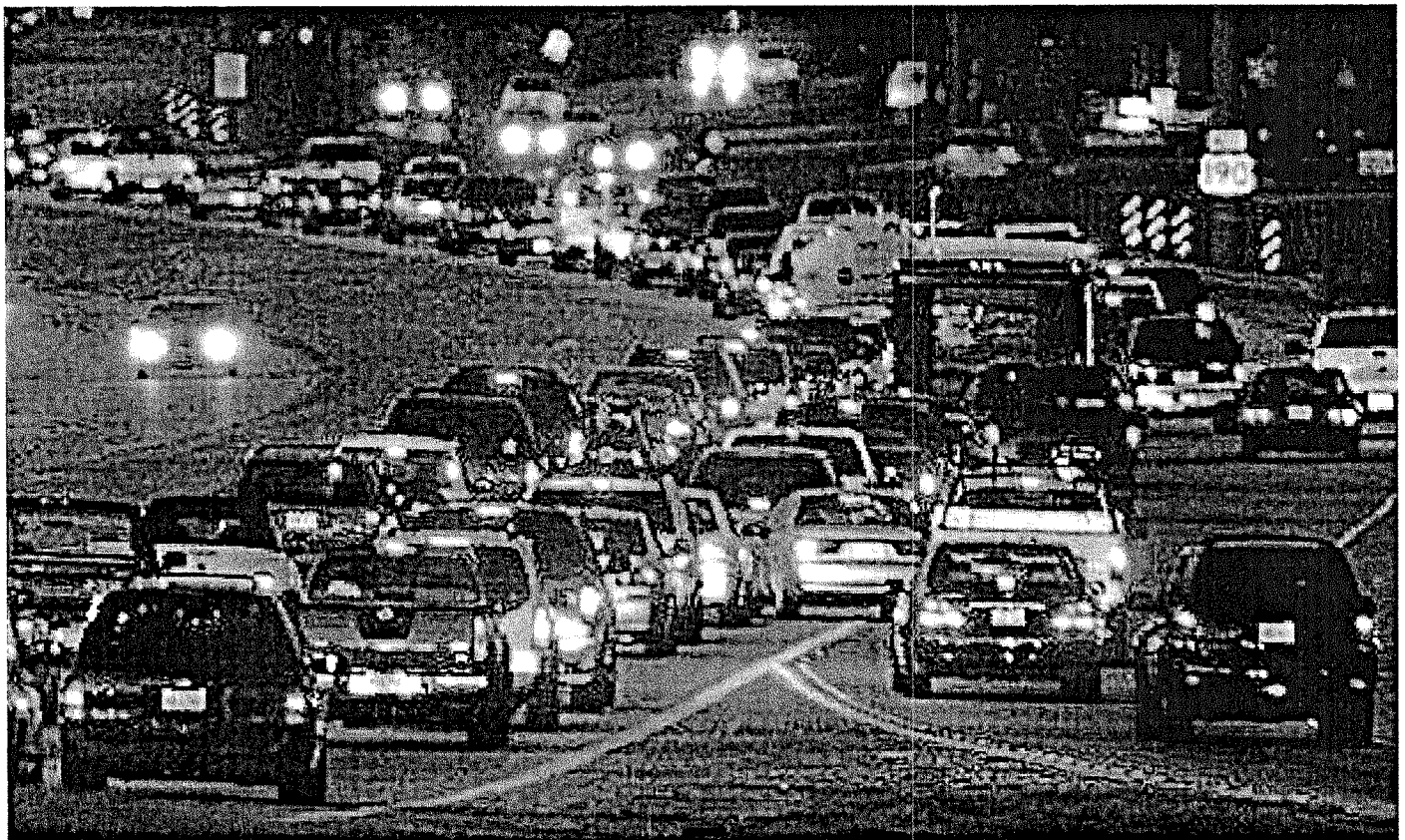


St. Tammany homebuilders, business groups gear up to fight moratorium

Ban on rezonings will hurt economy, groups say

BY SARA PAGONES | STAFF WRITER

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Traffic congestion in St. Tammany is one of the growing pains addressed by Parish President Mike Cooper's proposed ban on rezonings that increase subdivision density.

Sara Pagones

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St. Tammany Parish Council members often hear from residents about the ills caused by rampant growth, from gridlocked roads to frequent flooding, and they'll hear that message again Thursday when a proposed moratorium on dense development is on the agenda.

But they'll also get an earful from people who make their living building homes, in what the parish's economic development agency has said is the fourth largest sector of St. Tammany's economy. Homebuilders and business groups are banding together to oppose Parish President Mike's Cooper's proposal to put a six-month halt to any rezoning that increases the number of homes allowed on a piece of property to more than one per acre.

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The proposal would not affect land already zoned for greater density, rezonings that have already been approved or commercial development.

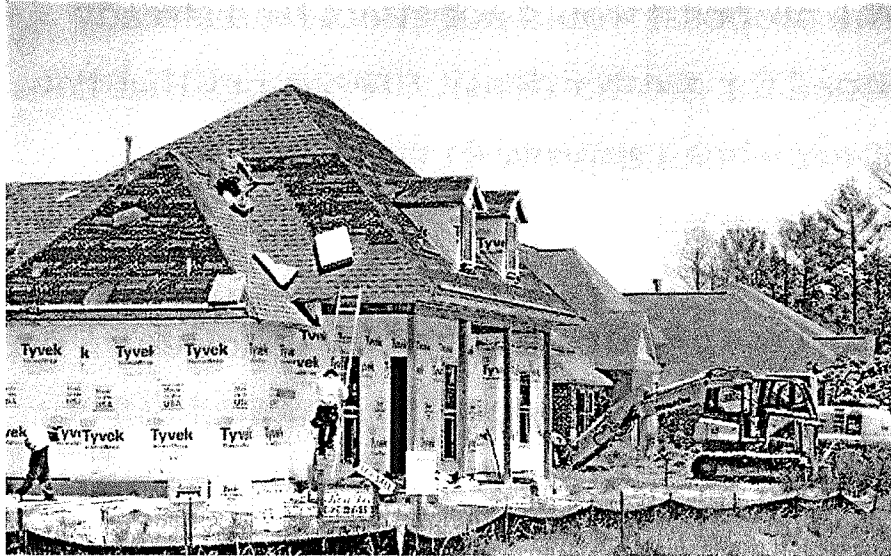
Thursday's meeting will be first showdown over the proposed ordinance. The council will not vote on it until April 7.

Is it legal?

Moratorium opponents raise legal and economic objections to the parishwide ban, which they say will effectively stop residential construction. They say it's too broad, and that a more targeted response is needed.

Proponents say people who already live in St. Tammany are facing more severe and frequent flooding, and that roads, along with water and sewer systems, are overburdened as developers continue to pave the parish.

The Northshore Home Builders Association, the St. Tammany Chamber of Commerce and the Northshore Business Council sought a legal opinion from attorney Paul Harrison as one



Homebuilding is said to be the fourth largest sector of St. Tammany Parish's economy.

STAFF FILE PHOTO

According to Harrison's analysis, the rezoning ban amounts to an inverse condemnation by the government - a "taking" of value. But he also said that larger lots increase the cost of housing, creating a disparate effect on minorities and poor people, potentially violating the federal Fair Housing Act.

Harrison said the moratorium would likely be extended beyond six months. "Hence it is advisable to threaten or actually file litigation," he wrote.

Amy Ybarzabal, executive officer of the Northshore Home Builders Association, said that the group isn't planning a legal challenge "at this time" but thinks Harrison's opinion provides reasons why Parish Council members should not vote for the moratorium.

"While there are no plans right now, it's important to have that legal opinion, because we don't think it's 100% legal to do," she said.

Economic effect

Moratorium opponents also will come to the council meeting armed with economic data that shows residential construction provided 8,199 jobs in the first quarter of this year and puts \$770 million a year into the economy.

According to a draft report, the homebuilder group says the ban would essentially shut down residential building, given the current inventory

parish of the \$17 million a year in sales tax revenue paid by the industry and \$3.5 million in new property taxes.

Opponents also point to impact fees paid on every lot by developers. "Where's the infrastructure that's supposed to be paying for," asked Ross Lagarde, president of the Northshore Business Council.

"It's important that people understand the construction industry," said Chris Masingill, executive director of St. Tammany Corp., the parish's economic development agency. "We're not only talking home builders but suppliers - from cabinets to glass - and bricklayers and carpenters, banks, financial institutions, lenders, Realtors, surveyors," he said.

His board has taken a position against the moratorium. "There are other options, and better options from my board's perspective, that should be discussed," Masingill said.

Chris Masingill.

The Business Council and the Chamber's committee on advocacy and public policy are also opposing the moratorium.

"Taking affordable housing out of the market doesn't solve the problem," said Paysse McWilliams, head of the chamber committee. "It may slow things, but at the cost of tax dollars and the economy," he said, adding that the parish is already in a cash crunch following the defeat of sales taxes for the criminal justice system.

A surprise move

Parish Council Chairman Jerry Binder said he didn't learn about the moratorium proposal until about an hour before Cooper posted it on

groups said Cooper didn't seek their input beforehand either, something that they would have welcomed.

Cooper declined to be interviewed. But in a prepared statement, he said that continuing subdivision development at the current pace without address infrastructure

St. Tammany Parish President Mike Cooper.

PHOTO BY GRANT THERKILDSEN

"will be detrimental to the quality of life to which we are accustomed."

He said that identifying and planning initiatives, and getting money for improvements, will help

needed to protect and preserve the health, safety and welfare of residents.

Support from residents

While the moratorium is being blasted by businesses, it's drawing praise from residents who have grown frustrated with what Lee Domangue, president of Bayou Liberty Association, called mindless overdevelopment throughout St. Tammany, including in sensitive areas.

"People have no trust that the council will try to solve any problems," said Nancy Wagner, president of the Coalition for Responsible Zoning. She pointed out that there are multiple building moratoriums in place in St. Tammany, and no one is challenging their legality.

"It's a pause. Let's just look at it as a pause and sit down and work it out," she said. "The Cooper moratorium might not be perfect, but it's got everyone talking about problems and acknowledging the problems must be addressed."

The need to focus on St. Tammany's growing pains does seem to be common ground. "It's a unique opportunity; everybody kind of agrees on something," McWilliams said. "It's a unique opportunity to work to actually have some solutions."

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