



# CITY OF HOUSTON

Planning & Development Department

**Sylvester Turner**

Mayor

Margaret Wallace Brown  
Director  
P.O. Box 1562  
Houston, Texas 77251-1562

T. 832.393.6600  
F. 832.393.6661  
[www.houstontx.gov](http://www.houstontx.gov)

May 16, 2023

The Honorable Paul Bettencourt, Chair  
Senate Committee on Local Government

Dear Senator Bettencourt:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today on HB 4057.

On April 5, 2023, the City of Houston City Council voted 13-4 to create a conservation district program. The approved ordinance is very narrowly written and establishes a pilot program instructing the Planning & Development Department to coordinate with six marginalized and disenfranchised communities to create conservation districts that serve each of those communities.

The areas include: **Independence Heights**, the first city incorporated by African Americans in Texas; **Freedmen's Town**, originally founded by 1,000 freed slaves who settled the community selected the site along the southern edge of the Buffalo Bayou; **Acres Home**, at one time the largest unincorporated African-American community in the South; **Magnolia Park/Manchester**, laid out in 1890 and bordering the Houston Ship Channel it is one of Houston's oldest Hispanic neighborhoods; **Pleasantville**, a post WWII community on the north side of ship channel populated by African Americans; and **Piney Point**, founded in 1865 by two freed slaves. Each of these communities had previously requested support from the Planning Department to manage inappropriate development and preserve their neighborhood character.

Long overlooked by developers and investors, these communities have recently become targets for new development as land values across Houston have escalated. New development is in the process of erasing some of the critical aspects of these communities. Residents and property owners understand the benefits that new investment can bring, but they also understand gentrification and displacement. They fear losing the integral parts of their heritage. These neighborhoods are not against new development. They just want to ensure that it is sympathetic to their neighborhoods' existing character - that the identifying characteristics of these communities may be maintained in the face of new investment.

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Each one has requested help from my department. These neighborhoods are without self-preservation tools often obtained through deed restrictions. This ordinance is the only option we can offer.

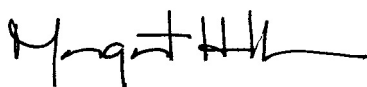
The ordinance limits conservation districts to these six communities. The exact language is: "Upon the completion of efforts in these pilot areas, whether that be by the adoption of the ordinances establishing conservation districts, or determination that a conservation district cannot be created in accordance with the requirements for such, the director may thereafter recommend amendments to this article."

Conservation Districts are community driven from the beginning. It is an area supported by property owners and designated by City Council in which certain development standards are established to preserve and protect a community's character and recognize its heritage. The established standards are tailored to each district according to the area's character and needs, based on extensive community input. The City will follow all requirements established in Chapter 211 of the Local Government Code. The Code requires robust public participation and Houston has added additional engagement, beyond what the code requires.

This bill is bracketed to Houston, no other conservation district program in Texas will be affected. The bill – written before our ordinance was passed by Council – seems to anticipate a much broader program than what City Council agreed to. It would hurt the efforts of these property owners and residents of these communities to save the character of their neighborhoods. It will undermine their hard work, their dreams of preserving their community integrity affected – just Houston. It might also undermine Houston's long-standing historic preservation program, which has recently been upheld by the Texas Supreme Court. 4057.

The City of Houston respectfully requests that this Committee not vote to forward this bill.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Margaret Wallace Brown". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Margaret Wallace Brown, Director  
City of Houston Planning & Development Department