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OPINION

Short-term rentals harm communities by stealing true neighbors

We can fix this problem with zoning.





By Douglas Newby
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As the Dallas City Council prepares to vote on the issue of short-term rentals, one simple fact deserves highlighting: Homeowners would rather have an owner-occupied home next door rather than a short-term rental.

Dallas homeowners realize that their homes retain more value, and are safer and more serene, if they are surrounded by other homeowners. By now, most homeowners know someone who lives near an egregiously bad short-term rental. And they know, either from experience or from the news, what can result from that: gunfire, prostitution, sex trafficking, drugs, and parties in a short-term rental that create threats to those living next door. That's the obvious reason there is increasing consensus that short-term rentals don't belong in single-family neighborhoods.

But there are subtle reasons for this growing consensus too. A home's value is depressed just by the possibility a short-term rental will set up shop next door. Even "quiet" short-term rentals can diminish the safety and quality of a neighborhood because they reduce the number of true neighbors. The eyes of neighbors on a street create more safety than increasing police. Neighbors can spot an unfamiliar person or parked car. Neighbors know the happily predictable rhythm of neighborhood life. Short-term rentals disrupt that pattern and camouflage intruders. A stream of strangers coming in and out of a short-term rental disguise bad actors.

When neighbors who have invested in a home are present, families feel safer about children playing in the front yard. Neighbors create community, and community creates value, both in quality of life and in real dollars. That evaporates as short-term rentals take root. How many short-term rental occupants participate in a neighborhood school bake sale? How many short-term rental occupants will alert the homeowner next door if a pipe bursts in a freeze, or help turn off the water at the alley? It is easy to forget how much we rely on our neighbors.



Opinion

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The arguments provided by a few City Council members advocating short-term rentals are flimsy. They claim regulation can eliminate the problems posed by the worst of these rentals. That's a questionable assumption, given that the city has trouble getting absentee property owners to even cut overgrown weeds. And most short-term rentals are owned by absentee owners. How will the city effectively deal with a drug or sex ring that quickly relocates to another short-term rental in Dallas or another city at the end of the weekend?

Even if an absentee owner investment group provides a 24/7 contact person, that contact can't stop a crime that has already occurred. Another proposed regulatory "solution" would limit the number of short-term rentals one owner can operate. That doesn't seem effective. If owning four short-term rentals is bad, why would three be good? Limitations on the number of properties could easily be circumvented by owners creating an LLC for each property, which is very easy.

As homeowner opposition to short-term rentals mounts, industry advocates claim that homeowners' fears about these rentals can be eased with regulations, rather than clarifying and enforcing existing residential zoning laws. Short-term rental advocates also claim rental operators will lose money if they cannot continue to operate in residentially zoned areas. In fact, absentee owners of short-term rentals can quickly sell their properties at a profit, given that Dallas homes have appreciated. Further, as soon as Dallas clarifies that short-term rentals cannot operate in residential areas, I predict that every single-family home in Dallas will go up in value, because the threat of such a rental moving in next door will end.

A simple solution to the problem of short-term rentals has percolated up from the homeowners through several city committees and commissions and was ultimately voted on and passed by the City Plan Commission. This ordinance clarifies that short-term rentals can operate in Dallas but not in residentially zoned areas. It is ready for a vote by the Dallas City Council. As a further accommodation to council members who may have hesitations, the ordinance's suggested 90-day grace period could be extended to six months or even a year. This would give even more time for short-term rental owners to sell their properties at a profit or convince property owners around them to petition the City Council to change the zoning in their area to allow short-term rentals.

Single-family zoning is a homeowner's most valuable property right. Healthy neighborhoods and the happiness of homeowners are the key to Dallas' success. Now is the time to reward homeowners who have remained in the city or moved to Dallas. A vote in favor of this homeowners' simple zoning solution will allow Dallas to continue to flourish.

Douglas Newby is a real estate broker who specializes in architecturally significant homes in Dallas. He wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.

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Douglas Newby