

L.A. neighborhoods closer to getting temporary mansionization limits

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Los Angeles lawmakers are poised to impose temporary restrictions on tear-downs in neighborhoods where residents fear mansionization -- the phenomenon of homes being demolished and replaced with bigger buildings that critics see as too large for their lots.

The rules -- which vary neighborhood by neighborhood -- are supposed to be a stop-gap while L.A. officials go through a much longer process to tighten citywide rules. But those stop-gap measures, known as interim control ordinances, have become yet another battleground between neighbors in some of the hottest housing markets in the city.

Some homeowners and developers say the proposed restrictions go too far, unfairly stunting the ability of L.A. homeowners to expand their houses as they see fit. On the opposite side, mansionization foes say the restrictions are sorely needed -- and that some of the complex rules still don't go far enough to stop the problem in targeted areas.

A City Council committee voted Tuesday to approve the temporary restrictions. The plan now goes to the entire council for a vote. The restrictions would initially last 45 days and could be extended to last as long as two years.

Councilman Gil Cedillo, who sits on the committee, said city lawmakers would need to ultimately reckon with how modern families had changed, including millennials moving in with their parents. But Cedillo said he would nonetheless move the plan forward as an interim step.

The Tuesday decision is the latest turn in a long-running debate roiling Los Angeles neighborhoods: Seven years ago, city leaders voted to curb the size of new and remodeled homes, limiting their square footage based on the size of the lot they occupy.

The city rules were meant to stop bloated, out-of-scale development that boxes in neighbors. But in the years since, some residents began to complain that the rules were riddled with loopholes that afforded builders extra space and allowed big, boxy homes to continue to proliferate.

Councilman Paul Koretz has vowed to tighten the rules, but planning officials said changing the citywide ordinance would take a year and a half to allow for repeated hearings and environmental

review. In the meantime, they suggested rolling out temporary restrictions to cover neighborhoods where residents have raised concerns about mansionization.

The proposed temporary rules differ greatly from neighborhood to neighborhood: In Sunset Square, El Sereno and three other areas being considered as possible historic zones, demolitions would be completely halted.

In areas such as South Hollywood and Larchmont Heights, however, tear-downs could continue but the new homes could only be 20% bigger than those that were demolished.

In the Oaks neighborhood of Los Feliz, basements would have to count toward allowed square footage. And in other areas including Mar Vista and Kentwood, builders could no longer get bonus space for using environmentally friendly methods or scaling the facade to meet certain requirements. Under existing citywide rules, such bonuses can afford builders 20% or 30% more space than otherwise allowed.

Eliminating those bonuses “means that these homeowners’ property values have suddenly shrunk by about 30%,” attorney Ellen Berkowitz wrote on behalf of developer and Beverlywood resident Michael Klein. When added up, she wrote, “the result is the loss of untold millions of dollars in property values.”

Several homeowners who attended the Tuesday meeting complained the rules would crimp their ability to expand their homes for their families.

“I’m all for controlling mansions....But that’s not what this is about,” said Chris Craigo, a Mar Vista homeowner. He added, “It’s going to stop growth in our neighborhood.”

Mansionization foes, meanwhile, complained that out-of-scale homes have continued to be erected as the city carries on citywide fixes, necessitating more immediate measures to protect neighborhoods.

“The character and livability of these neighborhoods is being threatened,” said Robert Young, who sits on the board of a homeowner group in Los Feliz. The point of moving into a home is to live in it, he argued, “not to build it to the maximum and try to make a killing.”

Some critics have pointed to neighboring Burbank, where city officials recently vowed to tackle mansionization, as an example of a city acting more swiftly to stop the problem. They questioned whether some of the new rules go far enough.

In Beverlywood, for example, the proposed rules would limit bonuses to allowing 15% more space than ordinarily allowed, which is “so weak it won’t make any difference whatsoever,” said Dick Platkin, a former city planner pushing against mansionization.