

## Cathy Hirt: Answers to League of Neighborhoods Questionnaire

1. For at least 10 years, the City has been pursuing a plan to halt sprawl and densify the Central City (through mixed use zoning and mixed use growth centers, etc.) with the thought of increasing revenues and making it more efficient to provide city services.

We represent single family neighborhoods. What is your plan to preserve our single family neighborhoods?

*Cathy Hirt: Fort Worth is definitely at a crossroads. While the focus has been on promoting urban villages/mixed-use growth centers with high densities in areas such as the near southside and along 7<sup>th</sup> street, the city has also annexed many single family neighborhoods in far west and far north Fort Worth. Most of these neighborhoods resisted annexation and are now in desperate need of services. Furthermore, many older neighborhoods within the central city have demonstrated a desire to protect their single family zoning designations. The City's Comprehensive Plan does recognize the need to preserve single family residential beyond the growth centers. Neighborhood associations should be encouraged to plan for their areas and to make decisions about appropriate zoning designations. A few such as Highland Hills, Woodhaven, and Carter-Riverside have developed completed plans in conjunction with the city planning department. These plans should be incorporated into the City's Comprehensive Plan. Workshops should be made available to assist neighborhood associations in the development of these neighborhood plans. Furthermore, city staff should always be vigilant in providing notification to neighborhood association leaders regarding any proposed zoning changes within and in close proximity to their neighborhoods. As Fort Worth continues to grow, it is important that the city foster relationships with all neighborhoods, develop policies regarding the protection of single family zoning designation with input from neighborhoods, and work to protect neighborhoods from inappropriate commercial encroachment.*

2. The City now has over 2,000 gas wells within the city limits, one approximately every half mile. We have more than 800 miles of gas gathering pipelines under our streets. The City's position for many years has been that there isn't much they can do to regulate drilling. Now we are seeing gas wells in the middle of neighborhoods and even perhaps soon in the Stockyards.

What is your view of the City's role in protecting the health, safety and welfare of citizens when it comes to gas drilling? Is the City's 2008 Gas Drilling Ordinance providing for the health, safety and welfare of Fort Worth citizens? How will gas drilling impact the City's tourism and neighborhoods?

*Cathy Hirt: Urban gas drilling has provided economic benefit for Fort Worth. The safety and health of Fort Worth residents should, however, always be paramount in decisions regarding urban gas drilling and take precedence over potential economic*

gain. People who live in our city and who visit our city (tourists) should be assured of their safety and welfare. The 2008 Gas Drilling Ordinance should definitely be amended in order to protect the health and safety of our citizens. We now know of many potential health consequences from contaminated air. I would recommend the following:

(1) Systematic and on-going testing of air and water quality by reputable independent companies. Unfortunately, the city has been far too complacent in this regard. The current study being conducted by Eastern Resources Group is not only late, but has also been seriously compromised by inaccuracies. If data indicate unacceptable air quality then I would also recommend that vapor recovery, improved valves and fittings, and/or green completion be required as needed for wells in the affected areas;

(2) Elimination of waivers for protected use setbacks. In addition, school setbacks should be identical to those being used by the FWISD – the protection of children is vitally important; and

(3) Additional protections should be put into place for wells in close proximity to our water sources – Lake Worth and the Trinity River. I agree with the League’s recommendation of the designation of these areas as “environmentally sensitive” with additional permitting and other protection requirements.

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3. A big issue for neighborhoods over the last couple of years has been the tendency of the City to issue new ordinances or new policies which affect neighborhoods – but not to include neighborhoods in the development of those policies and ordinances. What is your stance on involving the experience and knowledge of neighborhood leaders in policy development on the front end, so that neighborhoods are not always in a reactive mode?

*Cathy Hirt: I believe that good policy decisions are made when all interested stakeholders are invited to participate in the process. According to the city’s Comprehensive Plan, we now have almost 300 registered neighborhoods in Fort Worth. People who live in our neighborhoods have a great interest in the well-being of our city and want to protect our quality of life. I absolutely believe that neighborhood leaders should always have a seat at the table in all policy development decisions. When we overlook our neighborhoods, not only do we create an appearance of non-inclusiveness, but we also hurt the decision-making process. A good example was the situation that occurred with the Special Events Ordinance. Even though the ordinance had extensive ramifications for neighborhoods, no one was invited to participate in the process until a draft ordinance was already in the works. As a result, city staff had to conduct meetings with the League and neighborhoods “after the fact,” only to discover that many of the provisions in the proposed ordinance were completely unworkable. A lot of time and energy would have been saved if neighborhood representatives would have been invited to input their suggestions at the beginning of the process.*

4. How much tax revenue has the City given up in tax abatements and other tax

expenditures? What portion of the city's deficit is represented by tax expenditures? Is this a significant issue?

What is your plan to inform the citizens about tax abatements which are working (i.e., producing promised jobs, etc.) or not working? When we don't have enough revenue to fund core neighborhood services such as libraries and parks, is it a good idea to continue tax abatements? In the case of Neighborhood Empowerment Zones, is it a good idea for neighborhoods to continue them when strategic plans for them have recently been discontinued?

*Cathy Hirt: The City offers several types of incentives to individuals who want to do business with the city. Tax abatements are frequently used to attract or retain businesses. The city's policy on tax abatements includes several eligibility requirements for abatements especially the creation of new jobs. There are currently approximately 24 tax-abated businesses in Fort Worth. In 2010, according to city budget documents, tax-abated property was valued at \$432 million dollars resulting in a loss of several million dollars in tax revenues. There are also 13 Tax Increment Financing Districts in Fort Worth which have generated over \$1.5 billion dollars in increased property values. The tax revenue from these increases went back into the TIFs but did not go into the General Fund of the city budget. Together these two tax "expenditures" alone are significant in relationship to last year's city deficit of over \$70 million dollars. While I believe that we need to use both tax abatements and TIFs, I think that both have been over-utilized and have put serious strain on our budget and on our ability to fund core city services, especially pools and libraries. We need to be much more judicious with regard to their use. There should be complete transparency and full accounting of all abatements and TIFs (updated periodically) on the city's website. I believe that Neighborhood Empowerment Zones are good investment tools but not when strategic plans – that allow objective, not political decision-making - have been discontinued.*

5. Presently, the Fort Worth City Council appoints members of the City's Ethics Commission. Because of that, do members of that commission have a conflict of interest hearing cases involving ethics complaints against members of the City Council? Does the City Council have a conflict of interest in serving as the Appeals Board – even on complaints about its own members – from the Ethics Commission? How would you make the Ethics Commission more independent?

*Cathy Hirt: An Ethics Commission is vital to the establishment of an ethical environment at City Hall. In order for there not to be any conflicts of interest, ethics commissioners must be completely fair, objective, and free from any appearance of interest. This is accomplished by establishing strict requirements for being an ethics commissioner and by having a fair process by which commissioners are selected. The City of Fort Worth has a good set of criteria for being an ethics commissioner. It prohibits anyone from becoming an ethics commissioner who holds a city elected or appointed office, or who is a candidate for a city office. I would only add one requirement. I would prohibit any campaign contributions on the part of Ethics*

*Commissioners to city elected officials. The city also has a good selection process. It mandates that prospective ethics commissioners be nominated by community, civic and or professional organizations in the city to the City Council. The City Council is then required to make its choice from the list of nominated individuals. (I would like to see the League of Neighborhoods recommend a prospective ethics commissioner in the future.) I do believe however that the City Council should not serve as the Appeals Board. I would recommend that the Ethics Commission be given complete authority to take action and that its decision be final. Only judicial review should be allowed for someone not pleased with the Ethics Commission decision.*

6. If elected, will you continue to work at the job you have now? If so, can you be a fulltime mayor and also do that job?

*Cathy Hirt: As I have retired, I will be able to devote full time and energy to serving the city as mayor.*