

# Historic or racist? San Jose lawmakers debate new designation



by Carly Wipf March 26, 2021



Lawmakers are looking to create new historic district to preserve the architectural integrity of old homes near downtown San Jose. Pictured is a house along Schiele Avenue. Photo by Lorraine Gabbert.

An effort to create a new historic district in an affluent part of San Jose is raising concerns the city is memorializing segregation and racism.

Elected leaders voted 4-1 at a City Council committee meeting this week to nominate a new historic district near downtown called The Alameda Park/Schiele Avenue Historic District. Councilmember Dev Davis championed the nomination, which seeks to keep the neighborhood's unique architecture intact.

Vice Mayor Chappie Jones, Councilmembers David Cohen and Raul Peralez also voted in favor of giving the area historic status. But Councilmember Sylvia Arenas cast the lone dissenting vote after fighting to ensure the new district wouldn't exclude communities of color.

The proposed historic district consists of 132 single-family homes built in the late 1880s. It will span from the southside of Pershing Avenue to the northside of Schiele Avenue and will encompass homes along Schiele Avenue between The Alameda and Stockton Avenue.

Davis said the area is full of excellent representations of residential architecture and deserves historic status for being an "intact representation of early suburban development."

But that could mean memorializing the city's history of exclusion and racism, said Arenas.

"I don't know if we should be that proud of this district for its redlining history," Arenas said. She asked the committee to consider the implications of recognizing a district that traditionally barred minority residents from living there.

"This particular neighborhood was also built exclusively to not have people of color in it," Arenas said. "Back in 1937, no Black or foreign-born residents lived in that neighborhood ... There's probably a chance that continued to happen — with some exceptions, of course."

Arenas said the council should not to perpetuate exclusionary policies by preserving neighborhoods with racist histories. She worries neighborhoods will use their historic designation or single-family homeowner status — which Arenas said often translates to "white" status — to exclude others.

Davis insisted residents of the area aren't trying to exclude anyone. The neighbors, who live in mostly one or two-story homes, are more concerned about the impact from Google's proposed new campus. They are simply trying to protect their property, she said.

"They're worried about the value of their land and losing the structures because of speculators coming in to do the cookie-cutter McMansions because (the area) is going to be in walking distance from the Google property," Davis said.



A Schiele Avenue home. Photo by Lorraine Gabbert.

Being recognized by the city as historic would mean developers who submit an application to demolish or renovate historic homes would have to go through an extra layer of review by the city, according to Davis.

There are [15 historic districts](#) in the city ranging from [St. James Square City Landmark District](#) to the [Naglee Park Conservation Area](#).

### **Plans to densify**

Arenas asked the housing department to evaluate the proposal for fairness.

She also worried the city could struggle to densify the neighborhood under the [Opportunity Housing](#) plan, if it gets approved. Opportunity Housing would allow building duplexes, triplexes or fourplexes in single-family homes neighborhoods.

Planning Director Rosalynn Hughey said historic districts would be subject to Opportunity Housing. There would be standards in place to ensure new houses

match the current neighborhood style.

“I want to make sure that I continue to push for historical preservation, but we also need to be very aware and very sensitive to the effects of our action to lock in racist policies of the past such as segregation and redlining,” Arenas said.

Davis squashed Arenas’ effort to get the housing department involved and potentially delay plans.

Davis said the proposed historic district has nothing to do with Opportunity Housing or exclusionary policies. Residents advocated for a new historic district for almost a decade, she added, before the debate over densifying single-family neighborhoods.



Another single-family home along Schiele Avenue. Photo by Lorraine Gabbert.

Residents aren’t afraid of the neighbors changing but worry about how their houses will look if not preserved, the councilmember said.

“They like the way that houses look,” Davis said. “It’s a beautiful tree-lined street with 100-year-old houses. That was not in danger until Google made their announcement. It has nothing to do with who lives in those houses.”

Arenas said maybe it’s time for the neighborhood to look a little different.

“Maybe it should have more faces of color in it and maybe we should have more ownership by people of color,” Arenas said. “To call it ‘historical’ is an offense and an insult to the rest of us who could not live in that neighborhood until as of late.”

Davis, blindsided by Arena’s stance, snapped back.

“If you want the historic preservation process to change, please don’t do it by ambushing me at a Rules (Committee) meeting on a random Wednesday,” Davis said. “Bring your own memo to change the process. Don’t punish one neighborhood that’s been working (on this) for a dozen years.”

### **Next steps**

Hughey said the planning department is working on an application for historic status. The application will go to the Historic Landmarks Commission and the Planning Commission, then the City Council could formally designate the district.

Hughey said Arenas’ point about equity extends to other neighborhoods. She said the planning department would be open to a citywide conversation.

Peralez agreed the discussion should continue.

“We haven’t asked the questions in the past in regards to things like, ‘Should we be giving historic district designations to areas in our city that were mapped out through redlining?’” Peralez said. “I think I think those are big questions and I think they are worthy of us looking at.”

Arenas left the meeting determined to bring a new policy that will force lawmakers to reconsider the process for memorializing historic districts.

“We deal with these types of policies every single week and inadvertently, they create some inequities for some of our communities — this is one of those policies,” Arenas said. “It is also my right and my duty to stand up and develop other policies. So thank you for encouraging me to do that — because that is exactly what I will be doing.”

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