

<http://www.examiner.com/article/austin-city-council-approves-new-housing-visitability-requirements?cid=rss>

Austin City Council approves new housing ‘visitability’ requirements

[Lou Ann Anderson](#)

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Austin’s cost of living is moving upward and an ordinance amendment passed last week by the Austin City Council requiring new visitability requirements for residential single family and duplex construction seems destined to help maintain that trend.

[Letters on government letterhead from building officials of two locales (Pima County AZ and Bolingbrook IL), which passed laws covering every new house more than a decade ago, attest that the extra cost is little or nothing. In fact, what does cost a great deal is continuing to construct barriers: the high cost of retrofitting; falls and other injuries stemming from barriers; and increased institutionalization of people who can’t return from the hospital to their own home.]

Per **KVUE.com**, the council and staff have spent two years developing this new policy that passed 6-1 with only Mayor Lee Leffingwell voting against it. This effort reportedly dates back to 1998 when the city began requiring greater accessibility for homes built with city funds.

The amendment requires:

- Require that new dwelling units with habitable space on the first floor must be constructed with a bathroom or a half bath on the first story. The code currently states that the opening be at least 30 inches wide. The current code also states that the walls will be reinforced with wood blocking to accommodate grab bars.*
- Require that light switches on the visitable floor must be no higher than 48 inches above the interior floor level, and that receptacles shall be a minimum of 15 inches above the interior floor level.*
- Require a visitability route on the visitable floor, and to have a clear minimum width opening of 32 inches.*
- Require an exterior route to the no step entrance for newly developed lots and all new structures built on existing lots when practicable based on topography.*

In its coverage, KVUE reported mixed reaction:

Members of ADAPT of Texas, a grassroots disability group, praise the decision, saying it will help people with disabilities live more social lives.

“We don’t have the opportunity to say visit you at your house if you become friends with me let’s say and you invite me to the Super Bowl party you are having on Sunday, it’s probably not going to happen because most houses have steps and most houses have bathrooms that are not even basically accessible enough,” said Jennifer McPhail, Community Organizer for ADAPT of Texas.

Supporters also say the ordinance will have positive effects for children with disabilities, future generations and will allow people to age in their homes.

“We have an aging population. There’s been talk of the ‘silver tsunami,’” Council Member Laura Morrison said. “There are many of us who hope to be able to grow old here in the city, and to have the houses and the increasing population that need to have this kind of access is going to be important to a growing number of people.”

But home builders are not a fan of the ordinance. The Home Builders Association of Greater Austin say the ordinance is expensive, hard to accommodate because of existing codes and will limit choice for home buyers. “Philosophically, we are opposed to any entity telling an individual what they have to do in their own personal home on their own private lot,” said Harry Savio, Public Policy Vice President for the Home Builders Association of Greater Austin.

Mayor Leffingwell agrees.

“The larger issue is builders and people buying a houses do have a choice now and that choice would be outside the City of Austin. And frankly, we’ve been driving them outside the city in droves for a number of years,” he said Thursday. [The concern that builders and home buyers will leave a locale because of this kind of law has been raised often, but this flight has not occurred in reality.]

The council rejected a Greater Austin Home Builder’s Association recommendation offering builders a \$100 opt out opportunity that would then finance a fund to assist in the building of residential ramps as needed.

The changes will take effect July 2015.

