Panel to study preservation issue

By CARL REDMAN
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It appears there will be another round of study in Baton Rouge on the controversial historic preservation issue.

Although it endorsed the concept of an historic district early this month, a committee of the Metro Council backed away from wrestling with the details of creating a special historic district commission.

Instead, the Executive Committee recommended Wednesday appointing a five-member study panel to look at the issue and to draft an historic preservation ordinance.

Councilman Gordon Curry, who represents two of the city's three historic districts, said the committee will make its report to the Planning Commission, which will then make a recommendation to the council.

Curry said the study should take the better part of a year.

The study committee was something of a compromise between the historic district commission proposed by a number of residents of Spanish Town and Beauregard Town and opponents of the proposal.

The historic district proposal was drawn from the report of the last historic preservation study committee. Turned in several years ago, that report never made it past the Planning Commission.

The proposed commission was an attempt to give the people who live in the Spanish Town and Beauregard Town districts a mechanism for preserving the historic character of their neighborhoods, according to Ronni Patriquin, president of the Spanish Town Civic Association.

However, opponents of the measure said the proposed ordinance could stifle redevelopment of the downtown area.

"This study is not new," said local attorney and downtown property owner B.B. Taylor. Waving a thick booklet, he said, "Here's a 1972 study. It took from 1970 to 1972 to print it and nobody has read it -- but they printed it."

"They did it again in 1974. Then again in 1975, 1980 and now 1984 . . . What I'm saying is that it's been studied almost continually since 1970."

However, Curry countered, revitalization of downtown Baton Rouge has been a perennial area of study since the 1970s and it's still going on.

"Let's do this one more time, and let's do it right," Curry said.

Preservationists are not opposed to development, but they would like to see "planned and controlled" development in the historic areas, Ms. Patriquin said.

"If we do a good job on our historic districts, we will help downtown development, not hurt it," she said.

The council will decide who is appointed to the new study committee and several councilmen said they want to make certain the panel is balanced.

Councilman Don Ayres said he agrees with the historic preservation and the call for a new study. But, he added, there are people with millions of dollars invested in the downtown area, and they should be represented on the study panel.

The latest proposal — the one that died a second death Wednesday — called for a 15-member commission to safeguard the character and guide changes in the historic Spanish Town and Beauregard Town districts. The Roseland Terrace historic district (in the Garden District) was not included in the proposal.

Generally, the proposal called for the historic commission to review and give advice on any changes — construction, renovation, landscaping, street name changes, zoning changes and the like — in the districts.

The meat of the proposal rested on the concept of "appropriateness" — that is, whether a proposed change in use or appearance would be appropriate to the general character of the neighborhood.

The proposal provided public hearing and review by the Metro Council as an appeal mechanism for commission decisions.