

Concrete blocked in new city buildings

Builders question if ban on use in city subsidized housing is legal and say it would raise housing costs

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The Daley administration loves wrought-iron fencing, trees and green roofs. But concrete block? Forget about it.

Under a new City Hall edict, the construction material—including a decorative, poured-concrete version that has become increasingly common on the exteriors of new residential and retail buildings—has been banned in developments that receive city subsidies or certain zoning approvals.

Critics question the legality of the prohibition, and they contend it raises construction costs by forcing a switch to brick as the city tries to increase the supply of affordable housing.

Charles Ostrander, executive director of the Illinois Concrete Products Association, laid responsibility for the ban at the door of Mayor Richard Daley.

"He doesn't like the way it looks, and I think he told [Planning Commissioner] Lori Healey not to let the stuff be used," Ostrander said. "She will say it's not him. Baloney."

Concrete block is not prohibited by ordinance, said Ald. Bernard Stone (50th), chairman of the City Council's Buildings Committee.

"I am going to have a little conversation with Lori," he said. "She hasn't the right to ban anything.... She doesn't have the right to ban something that is provided for in the code."

Whatever the origin of the idea, Daley has long demonstrated an eye for detail.

After he visited Paris some years ago and was impressed by the illumination of prominent buildings, his staff unveiled a plan to bathe nearly 100 high-rises in light and illuminate bridges and bridge houses that serve as gateways to the Loop.

In 2001, Daley's office ordered up design changes for the commercial and residential development proposed for Block 37 in the Loop. A new architectural firm was hired to redraw plans at City Hall's insistence.

And in 1992, after a long effort to control the clutter of corner newspaper vending boxes, City Hall ordered that they be joined together in rows of no more than six at each downtown corner.

Daley role is denied

Planning Department spokeswoman Connie Buscemi defended the prohibition and its legality and denied that Daley was behind it.

"This is a departmental policy," she insisted. "When we have the ability to influence the quality of materials that are used in developments, we certainly are going to do that."

Aldermen Ted Matlak (32nd) and Manuel Flores (1st) said there have been problems with the material in some developments in their wards, including water infiltration and mold.

"We've had numerous complaints," Flores said.

Industry representatives contend that poor architectural design or shoddy workmanship by contractors, including failure to apply a required sealant, are to blame for any problems rather than a defect in the product.

"To my knowledge, concrete block is a perfectly acceptable-performing material," said one Chicago developer who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of offending City Hall. "If I were building my own house, I would be perfectly comfortable using it... Other than aesthetics, which are debatable, I don't believe there is superior performance in brick."

Using a three-story, three-unit building as an example, Ostrander's group contends that requiring brick on all four exterior walls adds nearly \$2,700 to the cost of each residence above the expense of brick on the front and decorative concrete block on the side and rear walls.

The cost difference between all-brick and what commonly is known as cinder block on the side and rear walls is just over \$12,000 a unit, according to the organization.

'It is troublesome'

"When we increase costs, it is troublesome," said Kevin Jackson, executive director of the Chicago Rehab Network, an organization that pushes for development of affordable housing. And "developers always are concerned about lack of predictability, increased costs due to requirements that are not necessarily clear," he added.

One of the biggest developments to be affected by the Planning Department's ban is Roosevelt Square, a sprawling, mixed-income residential development going up on the 37-block West Side site of the former ABLA Homes public housing complex. The project received a city zoning change, bringing it under the Planning Department's mandate.

Concrete block was used on the side and rear walls of buildings in Roosevelt Square's first phase, which has about 420 rental and for-sale residences, with no reported problems. The new ban applies to the remainder of the 2,441-unit development.

"This requirement will add cost to our construction budget, which in any affordable housing project—or any project at all—makes viability that much more difficult," said Thomas Weeks, president of Related Midwest, formerly LR Development, Roosevelt Square's lead developer. "With any change in building requirements, one needs to balance the benefit with the cost."