

NEWS // ELAINE AYALA

Development is a two-edged sword on San Antonio's historic West Side



Elaine Ayala Aug. 24, 2019 Updated: Aug. 24, 2019 10:19 a.m.



The VIA Centro Plaza is a multi-modal transit center on the city's West Side.

Photo: Courtesy Ford, Powell & Carson

Lately, it doesn't matter where you might find yourself on the city's West Side. You could be in the checkout line at H-E-B, at an art exhibition, or in your favorite taqueria.

Two issues surface wherever you go. They're called "investment" and "development" in parts of the city. On the West Side, they're feared as "gentrification" and "displacement."

A gathering at the Mexican American Unity Council Thursday night acknowledged these concerns in hopes of finding some middle ground — a balance that would allow the area to attract needed investment while protecting businesses, property owners and the poorest residents against displacement.

It was the fifth meeting in a strategic planning process for a new, federally designated "opportunity zone" encompassing three census tracts viewed as distressed and impoverished.

The tracts border downtown San Antonio. They include the University of Texas at San Antonio's downtown campus, whose planned expansion could set off its own wave of gentrification and displacement.

In a series of focus groups attended by residents, property owners and business people, the city Economic Development Department heard policy recommendations that can guide investors and developers and minimize gentrification and displacement.

A final document is expected in October.

The city brought in the Westside Development Corporation, which encourages economic development in the area, to organize the focus groups. Leonard Rodriguez, the group's president and CEO, has seen what unbridled redevelopment can do to low-income communities left unprotected.

Investors and developers can change the culture and character of a place and price people out of their homes, he said.

The policies suggested during the focus groups "provide some guardrails" for developers and investors, Rodriguez said, including listing the assets important to a community, such as culturally relevant spaces and historic landmarks.

The meetings allowed West Siders to help set limits and dream big. They were governed by an overarching premise — that investors and developers should not accelerate gentrification and displacement or convert affordable housing into expensive rentals.

Instead, the attendees recommended infill development and diverse, mixed-income housing. They want density to stay the same. They've recommended a historic district designation that would allow residents to write design rules reflecting their working-class aesthetic.

The recommendations support tax incentives for businesses that move into the opportunity zone and encourage construction on vacant lots. They call for removing out-of-service railroad tracks, and they envision pedestrians and cyclists using neighborhood alleyways.

The focus group participants want the Mexican American Unity Council to continue to offer services to residents dealing with title problems, an issue for families who inherited homes without clear title.

And they listed many places important to the area's collective memory — including the Basila Frocks building, Escobedo Creamery, Patio Andaluz, Chicho Boys Fruit Market and the Golden Star Café, a longtime Chinese restaurant in the area.

Similar ideas were advocated by Mayor Ron Nirenberg's Housing Policy Task Force.

Rodriguez says the recommendations could serve the interests of developers and investors, too. Projects would not become stalled when community members organize against them and appeal to the City Council for change.

“The overall goal is to help prevent gross gentrification and over-investment and encourage development in a methodical way,” Rodriguez said.

The West Side has been neglected for a long time and is in dire need of investment, he said. Many residents would welcome affordable housing, new kinds of retailers and improved infrastructure.

We've all seen what uncontrolled development can do to the character of an area, especially to its low-income residents.

Rodriguez says East Austin serves as a cautionary example. The high degree of gentrification and displacement ruined the area, he said. “We want to make sure that doesn't happen to the West Side of San Antonio.”

But the opportunity zone, the focus of a thoughtful, inclusive strategic planning process, represents a small portion of the historic West Side. The bulk of the West Side lies beyond those three census tracts. It's still at risk.

Elaine Ayala is a columnist covering San Antonio and Bexar County. Read her on our [free site](#), [mySA.com](#), and on our [subscriber site](#), [ExpressNews.com](#). | eyayala@express-news.net | Twitter: [@ElaineAyala](#)