

# Historic casitas stay— *Family Dollar leaves*

- by Marina Luna Saenz, staff

**C**oming over the Guadalupe Bridge into the Westside, one of the first things you see are the historic homes of years past. While the paint has faded, they still hold their Westside charm. They are historic but they don't belong in a museum. We work so these homes will serve their intended purpose — to allow families to live in and enjoy them. On November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014, I drove by the two historic shotgun houses on S. Colorado St. and Guadalupe St. They had a bright yellow sign on their fence. It was a public notice of an upcoming zoning hearing. After requesting information from the developer on the project, we learned that Family Dollar Stores, Inc. was seeking to move from its current location on 719 S. Brazos to the corner of Guadalupe and S. Colorado. A mere quarter mile from the current location, they planned to not only relocate but expand to a more conventional 10,000 sq. ft. store with a big ol' parking lot to match even though they admitted sales were low at the smaller location.

**This is why we fight** According to Family Dollar's preferred development company - Pavilion Development - plans for the historic homes included moving them to a nearby lot, facing a parking lot by their proposed dumpster site.

Even more alarming was that the Family Dollar store would be sandwiched in between the Alazan Apache Courts and J. T. Brackenridge Elementary School so that families would be put in danger walking to and from school as 18-wheelers and other motor traffic increased. In addition, The Esperanza Center's *Casa de Cuentos* would be across the proposed store, directly impacting their ability to carry out community events like *Paseo por el Westside*, *Día de los Muertos*, and dozens of cultural arts workshops throughout the year.

A change in the zoning of an area is usually indicative of a coming change in the neighborhood. Residents of this area have shared their deep family roots —spanning over 100 years— on the Westside. They are not looking to relocate and don't want to be pushed out either.

**This is how we fight** As in many struggles around the world, those most impacted by the decisions of a few, are often left out of the decision-making process. Since the zoning hearing was set for Dec. 16, 2014, a community meeting at *Casa de Cuentos* was called on Dec. 8th. Family Dollar was invited to share their plans with the broader community.

Residents drove from less than a mile away and others walked

a couple blocks for the meeting. In addition, people representing the Office of Historic Preservation, San Antonio Conservation Society, Historic Design Review Commission, Westside Preservation Alliance, San Anto Cultural Arts, Guadalupe Cultural Arts, Avenida Guadalupe, Texas Organizing Project, Inner City Development, and staff of City Council District 5 were present.

We invited a representative of Pavilion Development and Family Dollar to talk about the store relocation and the proposed displacement of the historic homes on the property. The president of Botello Enterprises, Inc. who owns one of the lots needed for the expansion, also showed up in support Family Dollar.

Almost all expressed apprehension about the displacement of the casitas and safety concerns for neighborhood families. We provided a map of other possible sites that would not require removal of the historic homes. The meeting proved unfruitful.

A community member suggested a petition— so one was created. Several groups helped circulate the petition and wrote statements against the rezoning. Residents wanted to mobilize and have a presence at the zoning hearing. Community organizing groups, labor unions and Westside residents showed their support through block-walking, phone calls and petition drives. We took to the streets to collect signatures and invite those in the immediate area to the zoning hearing — despite cold rainy days.

**This is how we win** Right before the Dec. 16th zoning hearing, the Zoning Commission of San Antonio posted their agenda. To our surprise, the case had been postponed. We learned that Family Dollar was still planning on leaving their current location but were unwilling to consider any other location.

We have a word for that: *se amacharon* — a term used to describe a horse who digs its heels in, refusing to be moved.

When sharing the news that the historic homes would stay, a resident of over 50 years said, "The whole point is that we want the houses there because they've always been there. Moving the houses would strip them of their historic significance."

We could not have done this without the help of the *Corazones de Esperanza*, long-time Westside residents, cultural arts and historic preservation groups and small businesses as well as Texas Organizing Project, Inner City Development, the Service Employees International Union of Texas and Domesticas Unidas.

What will happen to the building Family Dollar leaves behind? Is an affordable grocery co-op or organic farmers' market on the horizon? Maybe we'll see adobe structures make a comeback? Or, perhaps, a park will fill the empty lots. Now is the time to envision new possibilities. *Juntos, todo es posible.* ♦

