



by Graciela Sánchez,  
Director of the Esperanza Center

# O

## n May 6th over 80 individuals held a press conference at 5pm outside of San Antonio's council chambers to let the larger community know that we weren't happy with the report by the **Task Force on Dynamic and Diverse Communities**.

When the press conference finished, we waited in the security line to get into the chambers to speak to councilmembers. When we sat down, we noticed that they weren't there. Ten council members and the mayor, eleven members, get elected to represent over one million residents. However, only Councilman Warrick and Nirenberg attended this meeting—Citizens to be Heard—a session that takes place every Wednesday at 6pm.

Now that council members will get paid, I hope that they honor the residents of San Antonio with their presence at these sessions. We're tired of hearing that folks don't vote. But, it's no surprise that we stop attending meetings, stop believing in the process—when we don't feel that the city council is even interested in hearing what we have to say. This entire process of democracy is a sham when city council has already made decisions and aren't interested in what residents have to say.

Additionally, we shouldn't have our speeches that are already limited to 3 minutes for individuals and 9 minutes for organizations be reduced. We write speeches to keep to our limited times and then council arbitrarily decides to cut back our time so they can go home or to some other event. We, too, have other responsibilities and have adjusted our schedules to accommodate these meetings. Please respect us and give us the amount of time that everyone else gets when they come into these chambers. If there are many of us talking about an issue, it only shows that people are concerned. And you should be, also.

It's an unfortunate truth that the city of San Antonio has a long history of using governmental power to enable corporate insiders to take property and other community assets from working class San Antonians to give them to their wealthy clients and customers. City government has allowed commercial development that threatens our water supply, has refused to impose living wage and employment protections, and has permitted local utility companies (SAWS and CPS) to charge high residential rates in order to subsidize commercial use.

In the past several years, developers are focusing on the downtown area and the City is again using its considerable power to suppress and control our communities in order to facilitate exploitation by the wealthy minority. Our communities, poor and working

class, Mexican and Black, have lived in downtown neighborhoods for many generations. Indeed, these are the areas—the ONLY areas—that Mexican and Black people were permitted to live in under historic Jim Crow policies.

We have survived racism and economic exploitation by building strong communities holding on to our most treasured cultural traditions. Our communities were assaulted by Urban Renewal in the 1970s, but fortunately, the City and the federal government ran out of money. Now, however, it has become fashionable to "live downtown," the developers see money to be made, and the City is working to enable the displacement of our families.

After years of protest over downtown gentrification and the courageous struggle by Mission Trails Park residents, Mayor Castro created the Mayor's Task Force on Preserving Dynamic and Diverse Neighborhoods last year that was to examine many City policies that are encouraging displacement and gentrification and to recommend ways the City can AVOID displacement of long-time residents.

But then Castro went to HUD and Ivy Taylor, on the basis of a promise that she would not run for Mayor, became Interim Mayor. Under Interim Mayor Taylor's control, the Task Force has been diverted from its mission. As a part of the original mission, the Task Force was to "identify policies and programs that encourage investment in inner city neighborhoods but minimize or prevent displacement of people or adverse impacts related to history, culture, and quality of life of unique neighborhoods." Yet, the committee never seriously examined the city's policies that encourage gentrification such as: the Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone; the vacant

.....cont'd on p.7

Heck, the councilman didn't even show up to vote on this controversial issue. He couldn't look us in the eye to vote against the majority of homeowners who opposed the zoning change. He knew it was wrong and he didn't have the courage to stop it. Instead, he and this council rewarded a business that operated illegally for over a year!

Beacon Hill is a primarily Mexican and Mexican American working-class neighborhood and, as these op-ed articles point out, we HAVE held on to our cultural traditions resulting in thriving businesses in our neighborhood: Tamales, barbacoa, tacos, raspas, quinceañera party rentals, panaderías, antique shops, burger places, auto repair, etc. But, because we don't have art galleries and hipster coffee shops, that qualifies us as "dead"?

Because the applicant, Celeste Wackenhut, does not identify or relate to the raspa shop in her backyard, figuratively and literally DIRECTLY behind the house she rents, she has the right to say we have *no* businesses where

"people" can go to?

Since we do not have cocktail bars with fancy name drinks, we need life breathed into us?

We're not even "people" according to the applicant, and we're not "alive" according to you, Mayor Taylor. What is important to us, is not important. You get to erase us.

Ironically, as a Mexican American, I am descended from a great civilization that created great works of art and

produces highly sought after coffee. And the fancy name cocktails? ... are usually made with a liquor from Latin America. Yet, we are treated as ignorant who don't know what's "good for us".

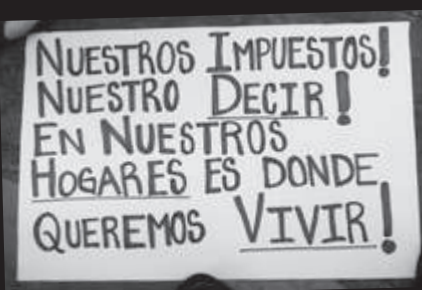
So, again, thank you to my colleagues for writing these op-eds. I reiterate:

**Council Should Reject the Gentrification Report.** Those of us who live and have lived in our older, established inner-city neighborhoods deserve to stay. We should not fear displacement. This is our home. ❖



Photo: Jerry Lara / S.A. Express-News

...Graciela Sanchez' Task Force Statement, cont'd from p. 3



buildings ordinance; code compliance policies and practices that encourage anonymous reporting and concentration of enforcement in low income inner city neighborhoods; discriminatory funding for park and street maintenance; and the lack of support for efficient and affordable mass transit for these communities.

Interim Mayor Taylor's insistence on a short deadline for the Task Force report didn't allow time to consider alternatives that have been adopted in other cities such as: the limitations on "flipping;" property tax relief for long-time residents; a moratorium on building permits; community land trusts; individual home rehabilitation funding, etc. Under Taylor's leadership, the Task Force was used to present the appearance of openness as if the city was willing to consider

community input on its pro development policies. Yet, community views and experiences were not permitted to affect the content of the Task Force's work.

The agenda for the Task Force was set by the Mayor and city staff who drafted the report based on four community meetings that the Mayor failed to attend. As a result, Interim Mayor Taylor did not hear the moving testimonies from long time residents who are being displaced or who are experiencing well grounded fear that they will lose their homes and communities. After the meetings, the report was approved with two dissenting votes from Task Force members, Maria Berriozábal and Nettie Hinton.

On May 6th as part of Interim Mayor Taylor's accelerated schedule, the report was presented to Council. Unbeknownst to Council and the Task Force, this version of the report had been altered by staff. Council was asked to formally adopt this report and its recommendations on May 14th. However, we asked council to delay the vote or to vote no.

As council members, who will soon get paid for their work, we feel that they should take the needed time to honor the 300 residents of Mission Trails, who a

year ago were essentially displaced by the majority of this council when they changed the zoning of their homestead.

They should also honor the hundreds or thousands that have been displaced in the last few years on Roosevelt St, at the Victoria Courts, at the Alazan Apache Courts and those who lost homes through aggressive code compliance enforcement targeted at the poorest communities in Districts two, five and one.

We asked that Council take the time to recognize that this Task Force had a serious job to undertake. Council members should have asked the Task Force to continue its work to develop effective policies to preserve and protect our historical communities and cultures. By doing this, council would have honored those who have been displaced or made homeless by these policies. The council would have shown respect to Task Force members and the community who spent hundreds of hours attending meetings, researching other U.S. cities' policies and practices for alternative programs and policies that protect our most vulnerable residents and communities. ❖

*Note: Read editorial for an update on The Mayor's Task Force.*