

# A Dead Neighborhood?

by Jessica Fuentes

I'm very grateful to the community members who represented longtime inner city residents at the Task Force meetings. I also want to thank those who authored the op-ed pieces that came out to reject the report. These pieces echo what so many of us feel and want to say, which is: A response to a council who thinks its' sole charge is to facilitate the ability of a few developers and their proxies to make money off the backs of us, the taxpayers.

This council uses words like "revitalization" and "economic development" to mask the true nature of "buying low and selling high". So then, Center City Development can turn around and say we have "100 new units" in this "depressed" area. But you fail to mention that our hard-earned tax dollars are subsidizing each unit upwards of \$25,000 dollars per unit! How about \$25,000 to the Mission Trails residents who are still struggling?

The city, through its' policies, helps developers "buy low" by the myriad of tax incentives, cold cash, and fee waivers. This could be acceptable if the targeted area had no current residents, but when its sole purpose is to get rid of "those people" ... to get rid of *us* and replace us with the creative class, empty nesters, transplants, cultural and economic elites then it is a crime; a sad indictment of this council's opinion of us: the residents they claim to be helping.

Mayor Taylor believes that perhaps we should look to her home town of NY, Harlem, or the Bronx, as to how spectacular "new Urbanism" is; but all I see is how developers have found a way to make money off of the property they had abandoned to poor minorities 50 years prior. San Antonio is not New York. We didn't abandon the less fortunate to crime and neglect.

I'm tired of attending panel after panel, hearing after hearing, where you all and city leaders like Ramiro Cavazos [President & CEO of the S.A. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce] sing the praises of people with stories who bought a house in an older neighborhood or who left the barrio or the East side but have come back. How we should all be like them. "Kudos to Mr. So and So ... , Wow! ... He left and returned to rehab a house ... returned to start a family. Wow! We should all strive to be like Mr. So and So!

How about singing the praises of those of us who have *NEVER LEFT*? How about la Sra. Gonzalez or la familia Rodriguez? How about us?

**I live in Beacon Hill.** I've been a resident of my neighborhood for over 35 years. My father was an electrician who retired from SAC and my Mom, a homemaker and caregiver. My sisters and I were educated in the elementary school across the street from my house, St. Ann's, and we all went to Providence High School, downtown.

My neighbors and I have kept up our homes as best we could, we speak our beloved languages of English and Spanish, and we frequent neighborhood establishments.

**Those of us who have lived in Beacon Hill for generations have sustained our neighborhood, after it was abandoned by many who left to suburbia. Yet, during our highly publicized zoning issue last year pertaining to 115 Michigan, Mayor Taylor, you had the audacity to say we were a "dead" neighborhood, and furthermore, that we needed "life breathed into us."**

The applicant, Celeste Wackenhut, who requested the zoning change on behalf of the property owner, Jeffrey Dersh, with the help of the high dollar land use law firm, Kaufman & Killen, added insult to injury when she wrote in an open letter to then-councilman Diego Bernal that we've been "exiled to live in a neighborhood where the *only* business we have is a gun shop!"

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



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

"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.

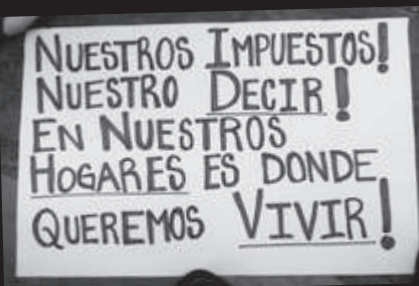
Ironically, as a Mexican American, I am descended from a great civilization that created great works of art and

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. ❖

...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.*