

WHOSE CITY IS IT?

by Dr. Rodolfo Rosales

In 1776 Adam Smith penned his famous book "An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations," where he presented the emerging Capitalist economies, including the US, with the idea of the invisible hand.* In essence the invisible hand is based on both – the idea that trade and market exchange channel self-interest toward socially desirable ends—and that a regulated planned economy gets in the way.

As old as that idea is and as many redefinitions that it has gone through, it has not lost its influence on how we make policy in the area of economic development in the urban areas. From free market and free trade ideas, to tax abatements and rebates to tax free zones, these are some of the tools used by our policy makers and political representatives in their quest for a dynamic urban market economy that in their view should provide the infrastructure that will allow investment, development, and trade to occur. The idea behind this philosophical view is that market forces have to be liberated in order for the market to prosper. And as the market prospers the benefits to all the citizens, intended or not, occur,

In San Antonio, the idea of attracting businesses and industry to our city begin with earnest in the late 1940s. At the end of that decade San Antonio had grown from 250,000 residents to 500,000 and never stopped growing. Today approximately 1.2 million residents live in San Antonio. As incredible as it sounds 1.2 million in growth is projected in the next twenty-five years. From the beginning of this growth San Antonio's leaders have boasted of a large trainable (cheap?) labor force while they were busy establishing the infrastructure for growth.

One of the major goals was to attract a middle class, consisting of professionals, sales, investors and entrepreneurs. To do so, San Antonio, in the immediate post World War II period, utilized the national policy of FHA, utility subsidies to developers, state policies, and national policies to subsidize this growth. The end result has been a break-neck speed to develop, not a circle of middle class around San Antonio, like other industrial cities, but a northward push over our aquifer re-charge zone where land was there but for the taking. This, of course, included the construction of giant shopping malls surrounding San Antonio in an arc fashion including a successful university hospital and a University of Texas campus.

While already established military presence has dwindled with the closing of Kelley Air Force Base, one of the largest, if not largest, logistical bases in America, San Antonio today boasts of a tourist industry that brings in millions, a health industry that has produced one of the finest public hospitals in this area of the coun-

try, along with the multiple private hospitals that have grown around it and added to that the continual construction and expansion of the infrastructure that can support this growth. As is evident San Antonio's straight-line path to success has been built on the development of a service industry.

This incredible growth has transformed the city into a giant policeman, directing traffic, in this case—investment, growth, and expansion—many times, at the expense of the less economically and politically able communities that happen to get in the way. This

accounts for about two thirds of San Antonio or in political representational terms seven out of the ten council districts of San Antonio.

While one would expect the representatives from those seven council districts to engage the elite sector of bankers, investors, developers, and major business interests in protecting their communities from the harsh development process where we have witnessed entire communities losing in the battle to keep their homesteads, what we have is a city council that continues to see

the market as the answer to the growth of San Antonio. (See *Illusion of Inclusion* by Rosales for an historical explanation of this view).

Further, from this view even public spaces are vulnerable to private acquisition of land in the mad quest for self-interest in an urban economy that is guarded and protected by the "traffic cop." From this view even communities are seen as hazards along the road to economic success.

This then brings us to the question "Whose City is it? Where do the majority of citizens fit in this scheme of a city? To whom do the public spaces belong? Where does the right to a living space begin? Where does it end? What is more important? The right to property as a commodity in the urban market or property by which citizens build their communities?"

These questions become more important to consider as we enter a year of uncertainty. How will we fair under the new administration, especially with the new Secretaries of Housing and Urban Development, of Education, of Health and Human Services, of Transportation, and of Labor, which will directly affect our city. More important, at this moment of seeming powerlessness, we have city elections coming up. Are we ready?

*Invisible Hand Definition | <https://goo.gl/IytvZX>

See Rodolfo Rosales, *The Illusion of Inclusion: The Untold Political Story of San Antonio*, (Univ. of Texas Press, 2000) for an historical and structural explanation of this view.

