

María Antonietta Berriozábal Reports on her Service on the Mayor's Housing Policy Task Force

August 2017 – September 2018 San Antonio, Texas

Editor's note: This report is from a member of the Housing Policy Task Force of San Antonio who is reporting to her community of accountability. It was written before the recent vote that City Council took accepting the report. María shares some insights on the report her that she and her colleagues on the Task Force finalized with Mayor Nirenberg's blessing. She has also written an addendum in this issue of La Voz reflecting on the Report

after the vote to accept the report was passed by City Council on September 6th. —The Mayor's Housing Policy Task Force consisted of five (5) advisors appointed by the Mayor to assist with the development of a comprehensive and compassionate policy framework to address the pressing affordable housing challenges that our city faces with input from community stakeholders. —

In August of last year, Mayor Ron Nirenberg named me to the Mayor's Housing Policy Task Force (MHPTF) along with Lourdes Castro Ramírez, Chair of the group, Jim Bailey, Gene Dawson and Noah García. We worked for a whole year to be in a position to present the final report to the Mayor and Council.

(Links to the report and to SA 2020 summaries in English and Spanish are at the end of this missive. Also, note Page 11 of the report where all recommendations are listed.)

While it has been a year of hard work, I am grateful to Mayor Nirenberg for creating this task force, naming me to serve and giving us his support throughout our process. I am also grateful to each member of the City Council who took time to meet with us. I appreciate the work of our consultants, of the mayor's staff and city staff. Above all, I greatly value everyone's participation in our bottom up effort of which I am very proud. Our efforts have seen that for the first time in the history of our city we have a data driven housing policy framework that describes not just how serious our housing problems have become—but we are also making recommendations on beginning to address some of these issues.

I say "beginning" because our work is just that. Our task force will dissolve and it will be up to the people of San Antonio to assure the implementation of the report. I do not want this to be one more report that sits on some shelf. I do not want it to be a list of action items where someone picks and chooses what parts are implemented and which are not. My four colleagues and I believe the urgency of our housing situation for San Antonio residents demands immediate action. Fortunately, you will be able to participate again in a year when a report is made to the public on implementation.



Mayor's Housing Policy Task Force Member María Antonietta Berriozábal introduces herself at the first Mayor's Housing Policy Task Force meeting. BONNIE ARBITTIER / RIVARD REPORT

I believe our final report reflects a consensus of our diverse group. It may not be what any of us would have written completely on our own, but the report incorporates recommendations that are the most important to each one of us and the communities, perspectives and experiences we represent.

Each of us agreed on the most important point and that is **how it should be implemented.**

Instead of simply recommending **what** our City should do, we also specified

how to implement those recommendations, as described in what we called the *implementation strategies*.

Of all our recommendations we believe that "**Develop[ing] A Coordinated Housing System**" is the most needed. And we believe the most effective implementation strategy is to "**Immediately create an executive position in the City Manager's office to lead housing and neighborhood-related activities and integrate with all city functions.**" [Page 28 of our report.] Not having a very-high-level executive to coordinate a housing system is a critical reason why excellent recommendations made in the past decades have not yet been executed. Here's why:

1. At least for the past three decades that I have been monitoring and have been engaged in housing issues of San Antonio, including the entire decade of the 1980's when I served on the City Council, work that affects residents' housing security has been performed across many different departments, commissions, and city funded housing entities operating on behalf of the City of San Antonio. Currently, there are over thirty such



direct ways for residents to communicate with their government and it can foster more public participation and trust. It also promotes accountability.

Additionally, there are other factors that make this report different and I want to cite some successes that have been already achieved.

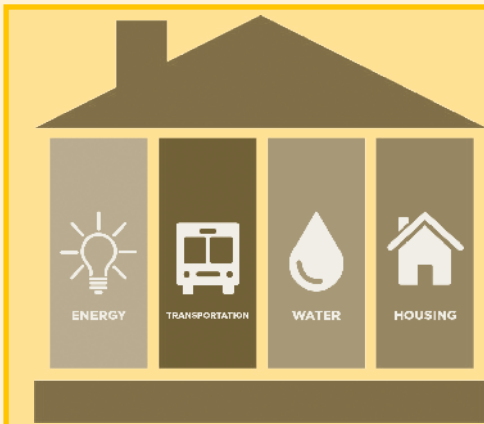
1. Our bottom up process included 588 unduplicated participants in working groups, public meetings and working meetings. Our reach was into the diverse communities that make up our city. This outreach is essential as one of the areas of government that will become even more critical in the coming months and years as issues become more complex. It is a much better way for the City to communicate with its public.

2. Housing and particularly affordable housing has been made a top-level issue at City Hall. This is historic. At their budget goal setting session a majority of the City Council members asked that it be made a priority in the 2019 – 2020 budget.
3. A majority of the Council members supported our efforts, although all had questions, as they should. Because of this, the budget discussion City Council had last month included a housing section, and data from our report was used in the staff’s presentation which recommended increased funding for affordable housing.

As I have indicated, I learned about housing needs from my own District-1 thirty years ago. It was the needs that I saw every day and the requests for help from my constituents that led the way to my deeper understanding and concern for housing. Unfortunately, housing was not a city priority at that time. I spent years working with many of my wonderful constituents engaged in struggles protecting our housing and dealing with major disinvestment in our inner city. That was the time when leaders in our older neighborhoods – that precious protective layer around our downtown – started the creation of Neighborhood Master Plans hoping that those plans would protect their neighborhoods in an uncertain future. Those were years when we had a much stronger investment in federal monies (CDBG) coming into the city and some of that investment went into low-income housing.

places tasked with housing matters, programs and processes that affect the preservation, rehabilitation and production of housing, all essential pathways to close the housing gap for all income levels. Critical in this is the focus on affordable housing. Because our challenges will intensify as we experience more growth and more stress on our neighborhoods, time has run out for continuing to do what we have always done, which has led to our current housing security gap. Additionally, those most affected negatively by lack of good communication are those who have the most serious problems and the least resources. We no longer can allow housing to be addressed in silos with people not being able to communicate properly.

2. Some of what we are recommending are more improved ways of doing what is already being done, but much of what we recommend are new ways of addressing old issues and being innovative in addressing them. We need more staff capacity and more expertise in housing matters. It is only through the vision of an executive with a comprehensive and complete view of all housing functions and needs as well as with sufficient authority to identify appropriate human resources that we can assure an effectively run housing system.
3. Because housing and neighborhood development are impacted by zoning, historic preservation, planning issues and direct services such as repairs having a coordinated housing system led by a high-level-executive, can create improved and more



Most definitely just as water, transportation and energy are part of our city’s infrastructure, housing is also infrastructure. Government has the responsibility to address it.

The COPS organization took advantage of that and the housing investments in the south side and west side were made thanks to those funds and that leadership. In the future, however, those funds will probably be reduced.

Through our efforts the City created a neighborhood department that operated for a while but at some point it closed. With the help of COPS, I was able to lead in the creation of the San Antonio Housing Trust. That is a great vehicle with much flexibility that can be used to meet a variety of housing needs. Today, it is in much need of review so that it can fulfill the goals for which it was created.

In those years we had no comprehensive housing policy and we still don't.

It is with this lens that I have viewed our effort this past year.

As far as our housing problems, we are not where other cities are today with tent cities along major roadways, but we have serious signs of what is coming. Already in areas in the south side and in my own near downtown, north side neighborhood there are encampments that the homeless have set up. Some people have already set up tents. And there is the history of the tragic displacement at Mission Trails where about 300 people were displaced. Today, there is also the displacement at the Soapworks/Towncenter.

For many people homelessness is one paycheck or an illness away, but in many instances the road to homelessness starts with problems in some part of our housing ecological system. Absence of good housing policy is a main culprit.

Today in our housing ecological system there are areas in serious need of attention. There is a great need for housing rehabilitation in large areas of the city, especially in those neighborhoods where the oldest housing is situated. There is a need for affordable and low-income housing to be constructed. There is a need for people to obtain help so they can stay in their homes. This is particularly true for seniors who wish to age in place. In addition to all these, vigilance and action is needed in fair housing.

Most definitely just as water, transportation and energy are part of our city's infrastructure, housing is also infrastructure. Government has the responsibility to address it.

We have shown the problems. We have made some recommendations in which our government leaders need to take the lead. As San Antonians we must push for implementation.

But in my heart of hearts I feel that ours is just one step in a long process that goes into the future. The responsibility belongs to all of us. We need to see housing as a human right and a matter of justice. We help people with their housing needs because it is the right thing to do.

The mantra of our task force has been: *Everyone needs a place to call home.* I hope it will be adopted as a mantra for many of you for today and for the future. Thank you, again, for your participation.

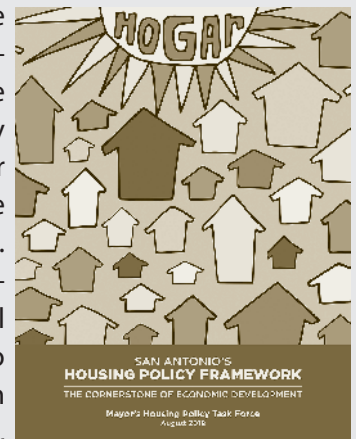
María Antonietta Berriozábal,
September 3, 2018

This is a link to our report and to the SA 2020 summary in English and Spanish.

http://bit.ly/SA_housing_PDF
http://bit.ly/SA_2020_reports

After the Vote...

On September 6, many members of our San Antonio community came to City Council and waited more than three hours to voice their support for the recommendations of the Mayor's Housing Policy Task Force, and share their concerns about the state of housing in San Antonio. All but one citizen testified in favor of Council passing the resolution to accept the report, which they did in a 8 - 1 vote, with one member absent and one not in the Chamber at the time of the vote.



As community members pointed out in their remarks, the challenge now is to implement the Task Force's recommendations. We can't allow this report to sit on a shelf as has happened with so many past housing initiatives. We need Council and City staff to act, and for that to happen, we need to act. We need to educate ourselves, stay informed, and stay engaged on housing issues. We need to advocate alongside our most vulnerable neighbors, and recognize that housing discrimination is a fact of life for immigrants, LGBTQ residents, seniors, and low income families and individuals.

The most urgent action now, in my mind, is the implementing of recommendations to protect people from displacement. As our city continues to grow, our neighbors who have been, or are at risk of displacement, will continue to be the most vulnerable people in our city. The City is leading a process to create a displacement prevention policy and mitigation fund, and the voices of those impacted by displacement need to be included in that process. There is a great deal of work to be done in order to achieve our vision for safe and affordable housing for all San Antonians, and it will require us to push policies forward, and hold our elected leaders and public servants accountable to make it happen. It will also require transparency in the tools we have now, including the Housing Trust and Housing Commission, and a laser focus on housing for the most vulnerable. Our work is just beginning and I hope you'll join me in making our city a community for all. —MAB