

Re-envisioning UTSA's Downtown Expansion for the Westside's Community Benefit

by Susan Morales Guerra, *author and facilitator*



The Esperanza hosted an on-line platica; *Re-envisioning UTSA Downtown Expansion for Community Benefit* on October 22, 2020 which presented some historical and current issues, gave voice to some important stakeholders and lifted some possibilities to meet the pressures facing community life due to UTSA's expansion plans. The establishment of a coalition to make a *Community Benefits Agreement (CBA)*¹ was one of the possibilities talked about in order to achieve a long term, holistic and whole-hearted development plan for the westside neighborhoods affected by the expansion.

1. A community benefits agreement is a contract between a developer and neighborhood residents and/or community stakeholders that requires the developer to provide specific amenities to the local community or neighborhood. In exchange, the community stakeholders agree to support (or at least not oppose) the project. (bit.ly/comm-benefits)

The invited panelists were:

Jerry González

director of UTSA Mexico Center, and Assoc. Professor of History, UTSA.

Vanessa Sandoval

UTSA student in Mexican- American studies and Anthropology, westside resident.

Dr. Roger Enriquez

Assoc. Professor in the UTSA College for Health, Community & Policy; Director of Policy Studies Center, Assoc. Professor & soon

Executive Director of the Westside Community Partnerships Initiative, Westside resident.

Linda Ortega

community activist with the Westside Neighborhood Assoc., and part of the Mi Barrio No Se Vende community group.

Lisbeth Parra

staff attorney at Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid Works with housing law, eastside resident.

Judit Vega

EPJC staff

Moderator posing the questions on: The proposed UTSA downtown expansion and how it may impact neighborhoods in regards to gentrification, displacement of families, and erasure of cultural, historic and living culture of westside neighborhoods surrounding the university campus.

The opening questions were:

- What can we (as community) envision for a different kind of relationship that we can have with large institutions?
- What is the responsibility of UTSA to low income neighborhoods; how can the community benefit?

Panelists pointed out that from its establishment in 1968/69 and again the establishment of the downtown campus in 1999, the presence of UTSA did not meet the expectations of grassroots groups who had worked for accessible higher education for a broader sector of low income residents in San Antonio.

As Dr. Roger Enriquez pointed out—this discrepancy creates challenges to this day and must be spoken and acknowledged in order to begin the work of envisioning together with community today. The present situation with the expansion plans is an inflection point to build and establish trust with the community.

Some efforts which have the potential to establish trusting relationships are being initiated. There are opportunities through the collaborative efforts of the Westside Partnership Initiative (WPI) and the Texas Housers and with the Mexican American Unity Council regarding title remediation and property tax problems. These efforts aim to avoid displacement of families due to technical and economic issues and to build upon the factors which already exist in the neighborhoods. UTSA has also been sending students of architecture/construction to do outreach in the westside neighborhoods to assess conditions of shot gun houses, as culturally valuable architecture with a potential to serve as affordable housing alternatives. And the WPI wants to do more.

How to move from incremental efforts for change to transformational?

According to Dr. Enriquez, anchor institutions in a coalition are needed to create a long term, holistic and whole-hearted plan in order to transform the westside from other major city, county and state institutions, like the University Hospital, HEB, City of SA, Bexar County as anchor institutions together with UTSA and community residents and their organizations if there is going to be a real impact.

Lisbeth Parra, described briefly what the *Community Benefit Agreement* is—a negotiation between developers and residents and local businesses who agree on certain benefits from the developers to the neighborhood. The intention is to give mutual support. Neighborhood groups, civil organizations, churches, social agencies, etc. negotiate towards a legally binding list of mutual benefits and are held accountable to follow through by law. There is always room for updates on changes and adjustments.

Already there were issues mentioned as possible benefits at this plática which might be worked into a *CBA*, such as building trust between policing authorities and the black and brown communities in the neighborhoods, particularly those who suffer with mental health issues, creating regulations for how development increases property taxes, agreements to support how local businesses can thrive, establish new programs geared for advancement opportunities for non-academic training positions in order for students to qualify for better paying jobs; also “stepping stone” programs from early education towards higher education with supportive learning programs and early exposure to entrepreneurial skills neighborhood youth will need for the future and



Frio St. Building, UTSA Downtown Campus.

the types of technical jobs available now. Also on the table are ways to integrate food security initiatives—land, learning, earning; as well as affordable housing for students—to name a few things that could be a part of a *CBA*.

The looming question is how to organize for such a long term coalition among anchor institutions and community residents and small businesses and organizations and who is the right stakeholder to initiate and coordinate this?

In such a coalition, the big anchor institutions have more power than residents and small businesses so I see the biggest challenge is to formulate a specific enough *intention*, and *vision*, which aim is to empower community voices. Community needs to be acknowledged as important and to be respected.

There are research findings from all over the globe which show that the type of information often missing but truly needed for change, lies within the dialogues and conversations in communities with the institutional stakeholders using methods and structures in which all voices are included and respected. Real transitions require the exchange of knowledge, ideas and experiences from equitable multi-stakeholders in collaborative teams (bit.ly/arena-drift).

Team organization and structures must preferably be consistent with the vision and intention of the work. Inclusive participation requires participatory formats for alternative dialogue, and asking open questions which invite conversations rather than debates and polemics. These methods promote lending equal power to different perspectives. Also, attention must be given to how to analyze and evaluate the outcomes from community talks. An understanding of consensus is helpful to how the team reaches conclusions.

When it comes to the UTSA extension plans, this will already have consequences for the small businesses, the social fiber of the neighborhood, technical infrastructures, family economy, the need for better sidewalks for children to get to school and needed attention for providing plans for culture, housing, public and recreational life and neighborliness. It is the residents and businesses who know “how the shoe fits”. This is worth listening to.

If this is not done, then what’s at stake is people’s individual and community well-being. What is “well-being” is, should be defined by stakeholders from the area, provided with the additional information needed as to how economic development may not always carry the promise of a beneficial social development for adults, youth and children of the neighborhood. Many people may want to move out but just as many may want to and need to stay, and feel at home in their renovated neighborhood.

A *people-over-profits* vision is possible to be woven into a *Community Benefits Agreement* to integrate these types of educational and social benefits. Initiatives such as these and cultural ac-

tivities organized in part by UTSA, for example, can intentionally contribute to a bridging of lower to higher educational activities, and broaden the extent of a community profile for UTSA and its organizations on campus.

UTSA, and other large institutions, have to want / “tener ganas” to see themselves successful at becoming part of a community and not just placed within in a community.

Crossing bridges and holistic planning.

The Esperanza Peace & Justice Center with some of the UTSA faculty and students and the residents present in the panel are ready to take a lead for change for a sustainable and people-centered future for the westside, starting with looking at the possibilities which arise from the UTSA expansion plans.

Engaging residents and youth is a big job which can only be accomplished through shared vision, clear intention and working coordination and facilitation by a team of people who are able and willing to do this job. Long term investment in a community is more sustainable than short term profit over people results.

Displacement pressures are looming large over residents and businesses and a moral obligation perhaps is overlooked or even missing from those who today exercise their power allowing for near free reins for commercial developer’s needs. But the community has needs which they define themselves and these must be an essential part of the bargaining table. Community input should naturally be an indicator for what makes a socially sustainable policy for the UTSA expansion plan from here on out.

Working with community, not for community.

Lisbeth Parra also mentioned that there is opportunity now for San Antonio’s westside residents and community to be **pro-active** by becoming involved now on this issue of the UTSA expansion plan.

It is my experience with community involvement in local area planning that this is a good opportunity for residents and other non-professionals to learn by doing; to understand the intricacies of planning and the enormous impact commercial development has on inner city neighborhoods. As several panelists mentioned, today’s community people are standing on the shoulders of the older generation of community builders on the west side. We can now set the bar for new higher thresholds for working for the changes which these times call for.

Dr. Enriquez stated that The Westside Partnership Initiative is ready to make applied efforts to follow up the issues of discontent and disaccord from all previous studies of what impact economic development is doing to inner city neighborhoods, displacing the residents and dissolving the historical roots of the development of San Antonio. These things are complex. This requires larger holistic coalitions, major stakeholders, anchor institutions; together, to really transform the Westside, working with one another, and holding the community stakeholders positioned as equal partners.

The richness of San Antonio’s Westside life must not become an anecdote in the history of the city. That is not what Mexican-American people deserve, because we are still here.

Bio: Susan Morales Guerra; co-founder of the EPJC and presently working with the EPJC as facilitator for a team working on a grassroots, people-centered Equitable Community Plan for the Historic Westside, funded in part by NALCAB.