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Needed: A Displacement Prevention Plan

By Jane Ann Slater and Linda Davila, For the Express-News

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Mayor Ron Nirenberg and members of the City Council have expressed concern about the Decade of Downtown causing neighborhood displacement. Nirenberg said it best last year, “We should not be resigned to displacement as an acceptable condition in the community.”

COPS/Metro takes the City Council at its word, but actions speak louder than words. The council’s actions show that preventing displacement is less important than giving tax incentives and fee waivers to developers.

In December, COPS/Metro asked the council to delay the renewal of the Center City Housing Incentive Policy, or CCHIP, to ensure that it does not cause additional displacement. However, the council decided it must be passed in 2018. It gave lip service to preventing displacement, but took no action. Only council members Rey Saldaña and Ana Sandoval had the courage to vote against CCHIP.

It is time for Nirenberg and the council to display the same level of urgency for preventing people from being displaced from their homes that they showed in renewing CCHIP.

A city-funded National Association of Latino Community Asset Builders, or NALCAB, study showed that housing values in the neighborhoods surrounding downtown appreciated faster than other San Antonio neighborhoods. For example, parts of Dignowity Hill appreciated 130 percent between 2011 and 2016, compared with a citywide average of 26 percent. These close-knit neighborhoods are quickly being priced out of range for anyone who does not earn a six-figure salary.

In addition to CCHIP, UTSA’s expansion will potentially displace West Side residents. The city and county are bending over backward to fuel UTSA’s downtown growth. Yet no one is planning to prevent neighborhood displacement.

COPS/Metro supports a thriving downtown and the benefits that UTSA’s expansion will offer. We do not support development that pushes people out of their homes and uses



Work progresses at the Arts Residences at the Thompson building at 123 Lexington Ave., built with help from \$10 million in incentives from the Center City Housing Incentive Policy. CCHIP shouldn't be renewed without a plan to prevent displacement of residents in growing areas. Photo: William Luther / San Antonio Express-News

public dollars to do the pushing. We are against development happening so fast and furiously that existing residents cannot take advantage of the improvements. Development must be planned so that it benefits everyone, not just developers. As it stands, the city's decisions benefit developers with little consideration for current residents.

To date, the council's only action has been the creation of a displacement mitigation fund that helps people after they are displaced. This is needed, but displacement prevention is more urgent.

On Feb. 18, 140 COPS/Metro leaders asked Nirenberg to create a displacement prevention plan. He said that he would, but only after the completion of a displacement study, which has not started and will not finish until 2020. In the meantime, displacement continues. Neighborhoods will be disrupted well into the foreseeable future. This is unconscionable.

Nirenberg said that he was listening to us. However, the mayor and the council must do more than listen — they must act now to develop a displacement-prevention plan that includes accomplishing the following:

1. Increase owner-occupied rehabilitation investment in vulnerable neighborhoods. The city is heavily investing in downtown. An equitable investment must be made in strengthening and preserving affected neighborhoods.
2. Establish a city-coordinated homestead exemption enrollment program. Developers are aggressively buying up properties from unaware owners. The city should be leading the charge to educate homeowners about homestead exemptions, tax freezes for those older than 65 and property tax deferrals.
3. Establish a tax abatement program for homeowners. The city creates Tax Reinvestment Zones for businesses, and the same should be done for vulnerable neighborhoods.
4. The city must lead an aggressive land banking initiative to ensure there is property for affordable rentals. The city must also coordinate efforts with all public entities to ensure that land it sells is preserved for affordable housing.
5. Establish a coordinated housing system as recommended by the mayor's housing task force.

A vibrant downtown and strong, affordable neighborhoods are not mutually exclusive. Both can become a reality with equitable attention and commitment.

It is time for a Decade of Neighborhoods.

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