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To the Mayor's Task Force on Preserving Dynamic & Diverse Neighborhoods:

I had signed up to speak at the Tafolla Middle School meeting on March 18th, but time restraints did not allow my presentation. *It was far more important that the discussion be translated than to hear my remarks on Wednesday evening.* Please accept these comments and provide them to each member of the Task Force and include in the overall record of discussions of the Task Force's Mission.

## Lack of Translation

First of all, and fundamental to the mission, was the embarrassing lack of simultaneous translation for the benefit of many of our marginalized citizens. It is unconscionable that we invite citizens to speak and make no provisions for their voices to be heard, or make it impossible for them to hear the comments and responses in their native tongue so they can fully understand what is being said and what is taking place. I have attended union contract ratification meetings in New York City's Garment District where hundreds of members were able to participate with simultaneous translation from English into either Spanish and Chinese, so it can be done where there is leadership.

Despite inheriting this Task Force, Mayor Ivy Taylor must assume the responsibility for her failure of leadership, first of all by allowing political appearances to take precedence over this important Task Force, and secondly for her failure to direct staff to insure that all citizens felt welcomed and felt that their input would be valued. Had she exerted leadership at this meeting, she would have been simultaneously enjoying good politics. She did neither.

## Credentials

My family moved into Alta Vista 34 years ago and have been very instrumental in helping to rebuild Alta Vista and the surrounding area. Alta Vista is one of the most economically and culturally diverse neighborhoods in San Antonio, an eclectic enclave where all of our citizens are valued. Our involvement in the Neighborhood Association, plus our support for rebuilding the infrastructure through school, park, and drainage bond issues has helped improve the Quality of Life in our neighborhood. We have helped to secure a Neighborhood Conservation District designation, and our 104-year old home was the first rebuilt under the conditions and restrictions that we imposed upon ourselves through collegial discussions with our neighbors. The community-imposed guidelines did not add to the cost or time of renovations, but encouraged our investment and the peace-of-mind that enforcement of the guidelines would protect our integrity of our neighborhood.

In 2003, we proudly supported Rene Balderas in his race for City Council District 1. He was our friend and neighbor, a former Alta Vista Neighborhood Association President who led us through the NCD designation process, and was the architect who oversaw the rebuilding of our century-old home. Unfortunately he lost in the runoff.

Throughout his campaign, he spoke frequently of the need for San Antonio to focus on infill housing, citing that filling the vacant lots in the original six mile by six mile City of San Antonio with quality affordable housing would not require building any additional schools or police stations or fire stations or libraries. It would, however, provide additional revenue to fill potholes,

improve sidewalks, abate graffiti, and provide other public safety and city services. The same number of houses built in Loopland would necessitate infrastructure expense, adding to urban sprawl over the Recharge Zone for the City's water supply.

Balderas spoke of infill housing that could reinvigorate our neighborhoods, revitalizing with new neighbors, blending instead of replacing cultures, encouraging re-investment and rehabilitation of existing structures. He did not envision removing long-time residents, replacing historic structures with cookie-cutter fast-food restaurants, etc. His vision was to build upon the great traditions formed over the centuries and supplement with new citizens looking for walkable neighborhoods, close proximity to the jobs of the River Walk, and who sought cultural and artistic diversity. We never heard him speak of financial incentives to achieve the infill housing, but we would not oppose such incentives if it were to achieve the goals he sought and if the incentives did not price the long-time residents out of their own neighborhoods. Balderas' plan was for affordable housing, not the exorbitant rates that are not affordable for the average hospitality or education worker. To the extent that the incentives change the face, the heart, and the soul of a community, than it presents long-term harm to the neighborhood.

### **“Save Miguel's Home”**

In the 1100 Block of West French in Beacon Hill, four blocks west of my home, there are two homes, one almost completed and the other awaiting construction, that reportedly are incentivized by City programs that encourage infill housing. Next door to these properties, at 1123 West French Place, is the home of Miguel and Guadalupe Calzada who have lived in the century-old home for over 50 years. Miguel suffered a “widow-maker” heart attack a decade ago, and Guadalupe is on a priority wait list for a liver transplant. Needless to say, they have had little cash to make the needed repairs to their home. While part of their taxes helps provide the City's incentives to their neighboring structures, there are no City incentives to help repair their own home. Where is the equity in that?

A friend of the Calzadas was house-sitting while Miguel maintained a vigil at Guadalupe's side last year. The friend knew of her oft-stated desire to die in her home. When a stranger approached with an offer to buy the home, the friend said: “The house is not for sale.” The stranger said: “Don't you know that I can have the City tear down this house and send you the bill?” Later that day, the stranger was seen taking pictures over the back fence. A month later a process that ultimately led to a Demolition Order several months later was begun.

Neighbors, upon hearing of the plight, implored new City Council Member Roberto Trevino, an architect, to see for himself. He addressed a group of about 50 neighbors who had come together to help secure the Calzada's personal belongings which were left vulnerable once the utilities were removed and they were forced from their home, saying that as an architect he understands and appreciates buildings, but it is the people that live in the buildings that are his main concern. He has been faithful to that statement, and his staff is working on a solution to help those long-time residents like Miguel and Guadalupe who have fallen on tough times. Our “Save Miguel's Home” Team has had numerous meetings with his office and staff, and we are raising funds for the repairs as soon as we are given the go-ahead.

While City staff probably dotted the “i's” and crossed the “t's”, there needs to be a new chapter of the regulations, one that says: “How do we help the Miguel's of the City?”, not “How can we bulldoze his house and send him the bill?”

### **Lost Opportunities**

The Mission Trails Mobile Home Park represents a failed opportunity by the Developers. They showed their true colors, indicative of the total lack of caring for what was a community of human beings, marginalized by the process of removal with little input from them. Caring or compassionate Developers could have handled this in a totally different fashion, including providing some low-rent apartments on site for those dislocated. It could have been a win-win situation instead of the lose-lose that it became.

Another lost opportunity was the decision by the Building Standards Board to allow an absentee landlord to demolish two old homes in Dignowity Hill that he had subjected to demolition by neglect. Willing buyers who would have rebuilt the homes could have been found without destroying the integrity of this entry to the Historic Neighborhood. We were appalled at the meeting where BSB Members basically stated that an owner can do whatever he wants with his property in a Historic District – to hell with the neighbors, the Historic Designation, the history. Again, it could have been a win-win, and it became a lose-lose.

While the developer and the absentee landlord may end up making lots of money on their deals, they are still losers in the process. “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” [Mark 8:36]

### **Mayor’s Task Force**

We thank the member’s of the Task Force for the time that you have given to this Committee. We hope all of the documents submitted become a part of the overall record. We do not appreciate comments made by one Task Force Member who dismissed important statements by other Task Force Members basically saying that “we reviewed the documents, but they were outvoted” or something to that effect. Dismissing another’s comments in such a cavalier manner is the hallmark of politics, it is not the foundation of policy. Since the Task Force was an appointed body, not elected in a representative fashion, it should be looking not to a political victory, but a legitimate outcome needed to bridge the divide between the haves and the have-nots. Surely we can do better.

Further, a number of speakers stated, and a few Task Force Members agreed, that more time is required to properly address all of the various aspects of the original Task. Let’s get this right. We can do better. Do not rush this to judgement. Do make this an important issue in the May Mayoral and Council Elections.

### **Summation**

- Bring various departments together to craft ordinances that enable long-time homeowners/taxpayers who are down on their luck to repair their home to insure their comfort and safety. Do not treat Miguel’s Home like it was owned by an absentee landlord profiting on the nefarious activities taking place within.
- Support a bond issue to enable affordable housing, affordable housing repairs, etc. with provisions for payback to enable a revolving fund to help others.
- Identify homeowners whose homes need remediation at an earlier stage to reduce costly repairs, and to enable homeowners to enjoy a safer, healthier, more comfortable home in which to live.
- Be proactive rather than reactive.
- Insure that the City is not being used as an agent for unscrupulous folks who would exploit the frail elderly.
- Adopt the advice given by Sam Houston: “Do right, and risk the consequences.”

**YES WE CAN!**

**In Peace and Solidarity,**

**Bob Comeaux**

I would have  
said that never again can we invite citizens to speak and not make  
arrangements for their voices to be heard, or to hear the responses (in  
their native tongue) so they can fully understand what is taking place.