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HEAD: Planting HOPE for tomorrow Southern Dallas can flourish - with investment and nurturing
BYLINE: Last of five parts **VICTORIA LOE HICKS**
CREDIT: Staff Writer
COLUMN: LOOKING SOUTH DALLAS THE TIPPING POINT
ART: PHOTO(S): PHOTO(S): (DAVID LEESON/Staff Photographer) 1. For these first-graders at St. Philip's School in South Dallas, and for thousands of their peers in the southern sector, the future depends on investment and growth. But traditions of mistrust, neglect and political ego must first be overcome. 2. First-grader Brandon Averette, 7, enjoys lunch in the cafeteria at St. Philip's School in South Dallas. 3. Calvin Carter, president and CEO of Sunny Acres Community Action Association, told southern Dallas store owner Brian Nguyen to call him if he has any problems with crime. MAP(S): (TOM SEZTER/Staff Artist) WHERE THE JOB ARE; WHERE THE LAND IS CHART(S): ABOUT THIS SERIES

TEXT:

Last of five parts

Is the southern sector beyond help?

Is the desert incapable of blooming? No, give it a good soaking, and all the evolutionary ingenuity that allows its inhabitants to withstand the dry spells will burst into startling, marvelous bloom.

Today, the southern sector resembles a desert relieved by scattered oases. The Jubilee and SouthFair communities are oases; the new Unity Estates and Prairie Creek subdivisions are oases. Jefferson Boulevard is an oasis, as are the South Dallas Cultural Center, the Bishop Arts District and Pinnacle Park.

What's needed now is sustained watering by the city and philanthropists to ready the ground for private developers, according to those who have watched the area's struggles through the years.

"For 20 years, we've had recognition but no results," said Deputy Mayor Pro Tem Don Hill, who represents part of the southern sector. "We've had any number of

programs but very little implementation, because there was not the willingness to shift resources."

The mechanics of urban revitalization aren't easy, but there's a substantial body of experience from other cities to suggest what works and what doesn't. Dallas is richly endowed with private capital, a young and upwardly mobile population, experienced developers and generous philanthropists.

"There's plenty of capacity right here to do the job," said Jon Edmonds, executive director of the Foundation for Community Empowerment, which supports groups that are seeking to revitalize the city's forgotten half.

What Dallas needs most urgently, according to interviews with dozens of observers, is a realistic grasp of the task at hand, a strategy and political will to meet the task, and a readiness to amend long-held cultural norms.

Challenge No. 1:

Recognize that the southern sector is Dallas' future.

The city's economy and tax base are ailing, as The Dallas Morning News reported this spring in "Dallas at the Tipping Point," based on an analysis by corporate strategy consultants Booz Allen Hamilton. The surest cure is new development, and the only place with room left for large-scale development is the southern sector.

Closing the yawning economic gaps between the sectors is not just about redressing old wrongs - although that is important, too. Dallas' ability to grow the southern sector will determine the entire city's economic future and all its residents' quality of life.

"The city's boundaries are fixed," said Theresa O'Donnell, the city's planning director. "But we've never looked at the land-use balance. Do we have the proper mix to support the tax base into the future?"

Challenge No. 2:

Take that long ride across the Trinity.

Too often, residents of the northern sector - including virtually all of the city's corporate, educational and philanthropic leaders - regard the southern sector as terra incognita. Within the past couple of decades, a wall-sized map in the offices of the Greater Dallas Chamber omitted the southern sector.

U.S. Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson, whose district includes Oak Cliff, remembers going on bus tours with members of "the great white fathers' group" - the Dallas Citizens Council - who had never ventured there.

"If you live in two different worlds within the city limits, there is some innocence on both sides," the Dallas Democrat said.

That innocence has pernicious consequences.

"We're at a critical point in southern Dallas," said Don Williams, chairman emeritus of Trammell Crow Co. and chairman of the Foundation for Community Empowerment. "If we get more polarization between the haves and the have-nots, we're going to have a real problem.

"On the other hand, many of the problems in the southern sector are solvable. People at the Dallas Country Club may not think so, but they are."

Challenge No. 3:

Think globally, act locally.

The city staff has promised to produce both a comprehensive land use plan and a strategic plan for economic development. Both are critical as guides to future policies and investments - and as assurances to the private sector that the city knows what it's doing.

"A plan is a huge issue," said James Grauley, the Atlanta-based director of real estate for the community development department of Bank of America.

"We need to know if one exists, and whether it has teeth. Is it tied back to something, or is it just a nice idea? If you are a developer or a lender, you need something to tie into that gives you a sense of predictability. A deal in isolation doesn't work."

The two plans need to mesh, experts say.

On the macro level, the plans must address how to meld the city's many neighborhoods and economic drivers into a rational, smoothly functioning whole. On the micro level, they must assess the unique potential of each component, so that council members can target the city's resources to the most promising projects and areas.

"Every mayor, every City Council member, every city manager for the past 50 years has said we have to improve the southern sector, but what does that mean?" said Mayor Laura Miller. "The southern sector is half the city. It's huge."

Last month, consultants from McKinsey and Co. urged the council to press the city staff for a detailed economic development plan, echoing the earlier advice from Booz Allen.

"McKinsey hit us over the head again, after Booz Allen hit us over the head about it, to write this down and chop it up into geographic pieces and then go do it," Ms. Miller said.

Challenge No. 4:

Clean up your act.

You can't make good stuff happen until you stop letting bad stuff happen. That means rooting out crime and removing illegally dumped trash and other signs of physical blight. Their presence is a sure stopper for residents and businesses that might otherwise choose the southern sector.

That message is voiced by city officials, private experts and business people alike.

"There are some areas in the city of Dallas that would be difficult for us because of crime or just the nature of what's there," said Jeff Dworkin, who heads the Dallas office of builder KB Home.

KB committed to build a subdivision on Lake June Road only after the city agreed to remove hundreds of junked boats along a nearby highway, Mr. Dworkin said.

"That was a big factor for us."

Challenge No. 5:

Stand together or fall separately.

City Hall can't solve the southern sector's problems on its own. As best, it can be a catalyst and a convener - the entity that brings others to the table to work for collective solutions.

"The city doesn't actually build anything," said Ms. O'Donnell, the planning director. "It prepares the garden for others to plant."

Within City Hall, that means coordination among the police, the code enforcers, the parks and public works departments, and the social-services and economic development staffs.

Beyond that, the Dallas Independent School District must be at the table. The state and federal governments must be invited, and business people, too. Public

officials must convince private donors that rebuilding a community is as fine a legacy as funding an opera house, a hospital wing or a university building.

That advice comes from many in Dallas as well as veterans of successful urban revitalization elsewhere.

But cooperation is not a hallmark of Dallas' recent history.

For example, it took years to persuade the council to concentrate federal Community Development Block Grant funds in a few targeted neighborhoods, rather than spreading it equally among all districts.

"The CDBG money had been used to placate neighborhoods," said council member Elba Garcia. "It was hard for members to give that up."

Some council members still reject the need for a unified strategy.

"That's a bad idea, and I totally disagree with that," said Maxine Thornton-Reese, whose district stretches from Pleasant Grove to Oak Cliff. "I think there's nothing wrong with everybody pushing their agenda. As long as you're pushing your agenda, you'll end up with something."

Sometimes the pushing gets ugly: Council member Leo Chaney, who represents South Dallas, is at odds with Mr. Williams' Foundation for Community Empowerment, which he blasts as "paternalistic" because it denied funding to a CDC run by former council member Diane Ragsdale.

Mr. Williams says that CDC, which has defaulted on a loan from the city, is ineffective and calls the politicians obstacles to progress.

Challenge No. 6:

Learn to lead - and put your money where your mouth is.

Once City Hall has a strategy for getting the most out of the southern sector, it must use its money and legal tools to entice developers to participate.

The money would go toward adequate streets and water and sewer lines. Some parts of the southern sector lack them; in others, repairs and upgrades are desperately needed. These basics are essential to nurturing private development.

Land assembly is another critical task. Obtaining title to abandoned lots takes more time and expense than builders are likely to undertake. If the city does it, older neighborhoods become much more attractive for redevelopment. That's what the city's land bank, still in its pilot phase, is all about.

"The city needs to invest its money in the areas where it wants to see the growth occur," said Ms. O'Donnell.

That has been Boston's experience.

"If you want something to happen in community development, City Hall has to get involved," said Pat Canavan, housing adviser to Boston Mayor Thomas Menino. "Otherwise, organizations will continue to do the same thing over and over again but not learn anything."

Challenge No. 7:

Face the racial issue squarely.

"Our trust in you is very slim because of the way you have done us in our community," southern sector council member James Fantroy told the northern sector representatives and a McKinsey consultant at a recent council meeting.

The consequence, Ms. Miller said, is nothing less than "total gridlock, total gridlock every day."

Although the conversation is still framed mainly in terms of black and white, Hispanics are the largest group in the city today - and the fastest-growing.

Dallas' prosperity will depend largely on its ability to help a burgeoning immigrant population satisfy the desires for a good education, good jobs and high-quality housing.

Having a gut-level discussion about race is vital but not easy, said Ms. Johnson. There's a tendency on both sides to play down distrust and resentment, she said.

Ultimately, civic leaders in other cities suggested, distrust is the enemy of progress.

"You have to move on and quit using the past as an excuse to do nothing," said the Rev. Mel Jackson, the director of Westside Community Ministries in Indianapolis. "Too often, to cry racism becomes a launching pad for personal ambitions."

Olgen Williams is president of the Haughville Community Council in a section of Indianapolis that in many ways resembles South Dallas. Despite his community's long list of valid grievances, he said, confrontation alone would never have gotten the area its new library, charter school, health clinic and housing development.

"How far can you intimidate using racism?" he asked. "Nobody wants to be in a room where they're going to get beat up. Instead of getting some crumbs, I'm getting slices of the pie."

Challenge No. 8:

Power to the people.

The biggest missing ingredient for Dallas isn't know-how or even money, several observers said. It's faith in the ability of residents to be the driving force for a better future.

Dallas, rather than being open and inclusive, has been "insular and secretive," said Jim Reid, president of the Texas Mezzanine Fund, which makes loans to businesses in economically distressed areas. Mr. Reid formerly was an assistant city manager and head of the Southern Dallas Development Corp.

Social capital isn't built just by asking residents their opinions, but by giving them authority to decide where and how money is spent, said Dr. Elise Bright of the University of Texas at Arlington, whose book, *Reviving America's Forgotten Neighborhoods*, analyzed the most successful revitalization efforts nationwide.

"The key is giving real power to people," she said.

In Phoenix and Indianapolis, community councils make many land use and zoning decisions. In Boston, the city and a major developer gave residents the power to take unproductive land for use in public development and to vote on the nature of development. Those projects are thriving.

Henry Lawson, director of the SouthFair Community Development Corp., sees many of Dallas' southern sector neighborhoods ripe for that kind of involvement.

"There is a real hunger on the part of longtime residents," Mr. Lawson said. "They want real change."

"We've got to get a sense here that the city belongs to all of us," Mr. Hill said. "It's not just North Dallas. It's not just the development community. It's not just the wealthy people."

"We've got to say: 'This is ours. It's got to be better. We're going to make it better.' "

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Photos by DAVID LEESON/Staff PhotographerDallas at the Tipping Point

