

The Community Engagement Center's
Front Porch Gathering
Connecting community | Fostering collaborations

February Front Porch Gathering Recap

The Impact of Gentrification on Longstanding Residents of Austin's Eastside

February 28, 2017

It is no question that Austin is changing fast. Amidst foreboding promises of “redevelopment” and “urban renewal,” the gentrification of East Austin’s neighborhoods and businesses has brought displacement, disconnection, and disappointment for longstanding residents. To create a space for dialogue and story sharing, The University of Texas at Austin’s (UT) Community Engagement Center (CEC), located on E. 11th Street held its fourth Front Porch Gathering on the multi-layered impacts of gentrification on February 28th at Huston-Tillotson University (HT).

HT’s Dr. Amanda Masino, associate professor in Biology and advisor to the student group “Green is the New Black,” stressed the importance of sustainability in her welcome remarks to nearly 150 attendees. The event kicked off with an insightful testimonial from long-time East Austin resident, Ms. Betty Washington. Ms. Washington shared her personal struggles with the rapidly changing face of her own neighborhood and hometown, as well as some disturbing encounters with developers looking to push her and her neighbors out of their homes in favor of new housing developments. She revealed one company’s flyer read “[Move Out, Move On.](#)” epitomizing the dispossession and social erasure of long time residents from their communities through this ongoing process of gentrification.

To set the context for the discussion, Dr. Eric Tang (associate professor of the African and African Diaspora Studies Department whose research focuses on racism and displacement) and Dr. Bisola Falola (whose research focuses on urban inequality and landscapes of the future) revealed the results of their extensive community study that posed the question: “Why do long-time East Austin residents stay, despite the forces of gentrification?” Approximately 60% of East Austin’s longstanding residents are Black, and 40% are Mexican American, Chicano, and Latinx. For the purposes of the study, “longstanding” meant that residents had lived there since before the year 2000 and for at least a 15-year duration. Neighborhood survey results demonstrated across the board that East Austinites experienced feelings of isolation, loss, and various negative social and economic pressures. Survey participants reported that every which way they turn, there are new multi-story “ghetto mansions” that house fewer families and children and visually juxtapose the landscape of traditional single-story family homes. Likewise, these developments bring increased property taxes and disrupt the community traditions without regard for surrounding neighbors. New changes to East Austin have also been overwhelmingly White. The study cited a 442% increase of White residents in East Austin, between 2000 and 2010, a dramatic shift in the neighborhoods where Austin’s communities of color and Black and Latinx institutions have bustled and thrived for nearly a century. Dr. Tang summed up many people’s feelings by describing a shared “sense of indignation to being invisible in their own neighborhoods.”

After the presentation by Drs. Tang and Falola, the crowd dispersed to enjoy a meal perfectly suited for Fat Tuesday from The Original New Orleans Po Boy and Gumbo Shop and regrouped in four break-out sessions. As conversations continued, more

stories surfaced like those shared in the study. Local residents, students, non-profit leaders, city stakeholders, and other community members in attendance discussed the intense stresses of rising property taxes and the need to activate greater community participation within neighborhoods. It was shared that overall, the so-called benefits of gentrification that laud new business development, increased public safety and enhanced amenities, have not come to fruition according to those living in the heart of the East side.

At the close of the evening, groups shared their top ideas from the action plans they developed during the community brainstorming. City Hall was identified as a central target for local advocacy. Local and state initiatives for homestead preservation districts and tax exemptions were mentioned as areas to explore and perhaps push forward to politicians. The community members' key takeaways, however, focused on immediate steps such as stopping harassment from developers and becoming involved in local coalitions and associations, such as the East 12th St. Merchants' Association and neighborhood associations. In fact, attendees reiterated throughout the gathering that displacement and new neighbors involved in gentrifying weren't the main problem. The consensus described the heart of the gentrification problem as more than economic; it is the combination of social disenfranchisement and cultural isolation that disregards longstanding residents and the history of the East Side. To encourage practicable solutions during the brainstorming session Rev. Freddie Dixon, a group facilitator and longtime East Austin resident, stated, "gentrification is here and it's not going anywhere." While displacement cannot be undone, promoting recognition and respect of the culture of historic East Austin is the first step both longstanding and new coming residents can take to preserve the community as the city is gentrified.

Other suggested organizations who advocate around these concerns include:

- Six Square: Austin's Black Cultural District
- Community Development Commission
- East Austin Conservancy
- Neighborhood Associations - Holly and SANA mentioned
- Mayor's Task Force on Institutional Racism
- Austin Interfaith

Upcoming events and resources mentioned included:

- CODE Next events (community sessions, presentations to boards, commissions, and council) will be important to pay attention to, especially as the map itself will not be released until April 18
- Austin Global Shaper's white paper on affordability in 78702
<https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/7984896/Austin%20Housing%20Affordability.pdf>
- August 2016 presentation to the CDC on shortfalls in City of Austin's affordable housing plan
<http://www.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=260427>

The Front Porch Gathering brings together community concerns, stories, and research to come up with possible solutions. By the end of Tuesday evening, attendees had made connections with new neighbors and left with a rejuvenated sense of action—a new sensation to some and a familiar one for others who have been involved for many years.

The next Front Porch Gathering will be held on **Tuesday, April 18, 2017**, from 6:30-8:00p.m. to discuss "*Health Disparities in Communities of Color and the Impact on Mental Wellness*" at Huston-Tillotson University.