

# A Fourth Ward Overview

Photographs by Paul Hester

*Cite: How would the City of Houston work with the private sector and area residents to redevelop the Fourth Ward?*

**Efraím S. García:** What we want to do is develop a scheme for redevelopment that specifically addresses what exists in the Fourth Ward. Of all the neighborhoods we're working in, this is the only one in which 90 percent plus of the residents are tenants. It is the only neighborhood where the street pattern is very substandard - 30-foot wide streets throughout the area. It is the only neighborhood which is still sewer-restricted, even though it's in the 69th Street Wastewater Treatment Facility area. The infrastructure is not there to provide connections to the 69th Street plant. So we have to start with a pragmatic approach as to how we're going to build in the Fourth Ward. We have to recognize that the city does not have condemnation authority in the Fourth Ward. We're limited to the carrot approach. What kind of carrot can we wave in front of the property owners in order to get the best possible redevelopment of the area?

First of all, anyone who thinks that the area could be redeveloped so that existing families could remain there is just not facing reality. If the existing buildings are rehabilitated, we estimate that the monthly rentals would be around \$800 per month. So obviously the existing families who are paying \$50 to \$75 to \$100 per month, are not going to be able to remain. If we do not do anything in the Fourth Ward, eventually, under our current laws and rules, a developer can come in and install his own package sewage treatment plant and redevelop. Then the existing families will be displaced also. There is no scenario that you can look at - whether we preserve or clear - by which the families could remain there. That's been our paramount concern, although people don't think so. What are you going to do with the 6,000 people who are there? What can we best do for them? What we have done is to develop a scenario in which all 6,000 residents will end up in standard, subsidized housing in areas of their choice.

Forty blocks of Houston's Fourth Ward were nominated for historic district status to the National Register of Historic Places by the Texas Historical Commission Board of Review on 24 July 1984. While the Sixth Ward, Heights, and Main Street-Market Square historic districts precede this current nomination, the Fourth Ward is the clearest example of an area where opposing public, private, and civic forces have locked horns in a battle to determine the future economic, social, and physical form of this strategic fragment of the city.

To date, tremendous amounts of contradictory information with resultant confusion have obscured the issues and stereotyped the players.

The Fourth Ward elicits a wide variety of responses from unsightly slum to thriving inner-city neighborhood. Concentrating on Allen Parkway Village, Diane Y. Ghirardo argues in her article, "Wielding the HACHet at Allen Parkway Village" that not only is the demonstrated need for public housing in Houston at risk if this project is demolished, but the resulting social costs created by dislocation are more



*Efraím S. García, director, Department of Planning and Development*

We have developed what we think is a scenario to establish the goals achievable in the Fourth Ward. These are standard housing for everyone, an historic district of about six square blocks, and some low-income housing for the families who do want to remain there. The only way that we can assure that these things take place is to maintain some type of control over the development. But it has to be a voluntary control.

What we arrived at was the idea of having owners (about 16 family groups own 65 percent of the Fourth Ward) form a property owners association in which everyone has shares based on the square footage of land that each owns. Individual property owners are giving the association an 18-month option on their properties, basically turning their land over to the association. All of the land in the Fourth Ward is being priced at \$20 per square foot, whether it's on the freeway or in the interior. When the association can show that it controls 85 percent of the land, then we will recognize them as a body that we can negotiate with. They're in the process of doing that - they're up to 75 percent. They must commit 20 percent of the land to those purposes that the city wants - an historic district and low-income housing. We will not even begin to develop a plan for the other 80 percent of the land. We estimate that this will be worth \$150 to \$175 million. Therefore, the guys putting up the \$150 to \$175 million can decide what the market dictates.

We have agreed that once we locate the historic district, it will be deed restricted to protect it. There has been sentiment from the community to preserve Gregory School and convert it to a museum. We have a complete block of shotgun houses, for example, that we will preserve. Then we also have a vacant block of land for relocation of select structures (which the historical people don't seem to like). If you identify specific buildings that are worth keeping, we can relocate them to this block and come up with a nice little cluster of the museum and some housing. We know we're preserving only a fragment of the neighborhood, but we think that's all that's achievable.

What the city commits to do is put in the new streets and utilities required to redevelop the remaining 80 percent of the land and restore the value of this land to what it would have been without the historic district and low-income housing. The developer won't have to do that. Of course we're hoping to do that with federal money. That's why we said that it was premature to try and impose an historic district now, because it's going to affect our ability to get federal money. If we cannot get federal money, then we will have to do some type of special assess-

ment district or inner-city water district to permit the infrastructure to go in without the taxpayers paying for it.

Second, the city would assume the responsibility for relocating all the residents in conformance with the Uniform Relocation Act, which means that everyone would end up in standard housing with a rent subsidy of the type that the law requires. (And that's for four years. Then they go into the standard subsidy that the Housing Authority provides.)

And third, because we know that it's not going to be economically feasible to build low-income housing on \$20-per-square-foot land, we will provide subsidies to whoever will develop the low-income housing. We're looking primarily to cooperative housing or low-income elderly housing. We will provide subsidies to those who develop it, whether or not they're non-profit, so that they can have an economical price.

That's the framework of the plan. Once we have agreed to that plan, the owners, in conjunction with the city, will make available the land on a request-for-proposal basis. Although we've had three or four major developers come forward and say "We want the land" - they're interested - we have set criteria in our request-for-proposals through which the city would have a hand in determining who the developer is going to be and the criteria that are going to be used.

The first criterion is going to be the price. The next criterion is the public-interest development requirements (such as elderly housing), which must be met or exceeded. The next item we would consider is the nature of the development proposed: the type and density of use, the development schedule, the total private investment. It's important to us because we leverage the federal money by private investment, so that the greater the private investment, the greater the federal dollars we would have. The city commits itself to cooperate with the developer in developing the plan for the 80 percent of the land: put the streets where he wants them, put the infrastructure where he wants it. Most of our analyses indicate that the area probably will develop in the span of five to ten years. Allen Parkway Village is 37 acres. In the Fourth Ward we have 88 acres of privately-owned land, 38 acres of right-of-way, and 9 acres of cemeteries. So basically what we have available is about 150 acres of developable land. And that could be absorbed in a period of five to ten years.

*At press time, García announced that the Fourth Ward property owner's association had control of 85 percent of the land in the area. (JK)*

than Houstonians are willing to bear. Drexel Turner, in a brief essay entitled "The Greening of Allen Parkway Village" proposes to gradually turn Allen Parkway Village into an inner-city park, thereby increasing Houston's tax base in the surrounding area. Dana Cuff brings the reader up to date on current activities to save the existing low-income residential use of the Fourth Ward.

In "A Fourth Ward Overview," Cite solicits through specific questions the dreams, intentions, and frustrations of some of the participants involved in the evolution of

this neighborhood. Efraim S. Garcia is the director of Houston's Department of Planning and Development. Deborah Post is an assistant professor of law at the University of Houston Law Center. Francis Corso is a broker with Metropolitan Development, a major landholder in the area. Gladys House is the president of the Freedman's Town Association. Carvel Glenn, a vice president of Gemcraft Homes, while not directly involved with Fourth Ward issues, uses his knowledge of Houston's housing market to analyze the prospects for residential development in this neighborhood. Robert Eury is the

president of Central Houston Incorporated, which has a mandate from Houston's downtown business community to evolve plans for the revitalization of Houston's inner city. Lenwood Johnson is the president of the Allen Parkway Village Resident Council. Earl Phillips, executive director of the Housing Authority of the City of Houston was asked to participate in this present forum, but declined to respond to Cite's queries. Thanks to Dana Cuff, James Murdaugh, Janet M. O'Brien, Andrew Rudnik, and William Stern for their contributions of time which made this commentary possible.

This series of articles, essays, and short interviews does not attempt to articulate a solution to what is admittedly a complex set of issues involving conflicting interests and ideologies. Rather this overview is an incomplete dictionary of ideas and forms of some of the personalities who would shape part of Houston's future. The collection of these ideas is only an incremental tool which may help to stimulate a further public dialogue about upcoming decisions which affect not only the Fourth Ward, but the shape and tenor of Houston. (JK)



Deborah Post, assistant professor of law, University of Houston Law Center

**Cite:** Why does the Fourth Ward deserve designation as an historic district?

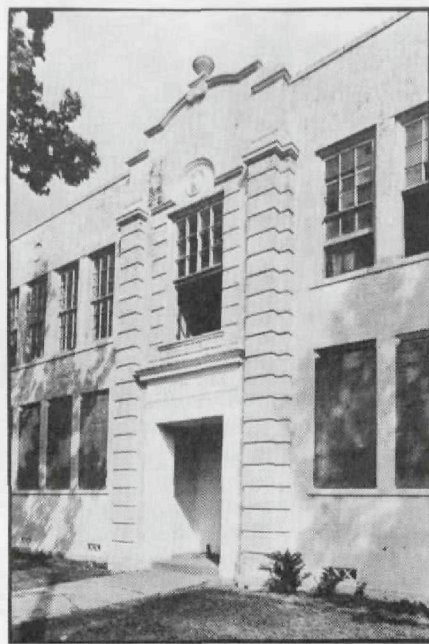
**Deborah Post:** The criteria needed for nomination and listing in the National Register of Historic Places, as explained by the Texas Historical Commission, are that the object or property "be significant in American history, architecture, archeology and culture," and that it demonstrate "integrity of location, design setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and associations." Additionally, the nominee must "embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction. . . , " or there must be an association with "the lives of persons significant in our past," or events that made a significant contribution to the "broad pattern of our history." According to these guidelines, the Fourth Ward merits designation as an historic district.

Inside the boundaries of the proposed district there exists the most remarkable collection of late 19th- and early 20th-century vernacular architecture. Many of the buildings, though structurally sound, are in need of repair. Yet one finds real beauty in the simplicity of many of the structures - L- and T-shaped houses, bungalows, gable-front houses, square houses with hipped roofs, and the many variations that can be seen in the shotgun houses that are scattered throughout the neighborhood.

Within this neighborhood you find the original homesteads of leaders who date back to the time immediately following emancipation. Jack Yates, the second pastor of Antioch Baptist Church, built his home with his own hands. It is still standing on Andrews Street. Yates exemplified the versatility and commitment of the leaders of the black community following emancipation. One of his finest achievements was the establishment of Houston College in 1885 to teach blacks trades like bricklaying and carpentry. Rev. Ned P. Pullum, whose home is also on Andrews Street, was pastor of Antioch Baptist Church and then Friendship Baptist Church, but he was also an entrepreneur who owned a brick works and rental property. Shotgun houses, most of which

were admittedly constructed as rental property for purposes of speculation, represented one of the first attempts at entrepreneurial activity by black businessmen.

Among the most significant structures in the district are the churches - St. James M.E. Church, Friendship Baptist Church, Macedonia Baptist Church, Bethel Baptist Church, and the Good Hope Missionary Baptist Church. They are significant from an historical standpoint because more than anything else, these institutions provide a source of social cohesiveness. The integrity of the neighborhood, the sense of continuity, and the importance of history is maintained in part by virtue of the presence of congregations that date back to the late 19th century.



Gregory School

If there is one building that symbolizes the aspirations and the values of the community in which it stood, it is the main building of the Gregory Elementary School. The predecessor of the school was Gregory Institute, founded in 1872. The Nomination dates the present structure from 1929, but *The Development of Houston Negro Schools*, by Ira B. Bryant, Jr., written in 1935, refers to the "old" building which was constructed in 1903. The Nomination refers to the "modest classical decoration" of old Gregory. Perhaps this style is reflective of the aesthetics of the black community at the turn of the century. The same fascination with classical architecture was also reflected in the Colored Carnegie Library of Houston



Francis Corso, broker, Metropolitan Development

(now demolished), designed by the architect W. Sidney Pittman, son-in-law of Booker T. Washington. Houston's black community raised the funds necessary to buy the land on which that library, the first black Carnegie library in the nation, was constructed.

Throughout the 1920s, the homes of many of the more affluent doctors and lawyers were located in the San Felipe district, as it was then called, either along San Felipe (what is now West Dallas), or on Robin Street, which at that time extended well into downtown. Others, such as J. Vance Lewis, attorney and author of the *Red-book*, one of the few resources regarding the history of the black community in Houston, built their homes here. But the black middle class was the main market for homes in the Fourth Ward. It was composed of educators, like Pinkee Yates (a teacher at Gregory Institute and later at Colored High), and G.B.M. Turner (principal of Frances Harper School and one of the founders of Pilgrim Congregational Church); journalists and printers like Rutherford Yates (who owned and operated the first black printing press in Houston); and there were a number of clergy who lived in the district.

One cannot discuss the history of the United States without discussing the legacy of slavery and the segregation that followed. The lives of the residents of the Fourth Ward is illustrative of what was happening on a national level. In the Fourth Ward, the newly emancipated slaves and their descendants embraced the values and aspirations of the society that had enslaved them and then isolated them socially and culturally. When the City of Houston would not educate them, they opened their own schools; when the public hospital would not care for their sick, they established Union Hospital; when they were not admitted to the Houston Public Library, they found a way to build their own library; and when the city would not pave their streets, they did it themselves. The Fourth Ward deserves designation as an historic district and should be placed in the National Register because it is a part of the history of all Americans.

**Cite:** What do the numerous landowners of the Fourth Ward feel are the responsibilities and role of the city government and its associated agencies in planning for the future uses of their land?

**Frances Corso:** The significant participation of the public sector is crucial in achieving the investment goals of the Fourth Ward landowners because no development can take place there without a concrete plan to implement the establishment of an historic site and the orderly relocation of the area's present tenants, homeowners, businesses, and churches.

The availability of housing is a critical element for the welfare of Fourth Ward residents as well as many other citizens in our city and it is necessary to cooperate with the Housing Authority of the City of Houston which is charged with the responsibility of providing decent, safe, and sanitary public housing here. The existing street grid must be completely redeveloped and the massive replacement of the now-obsolete infrastructure is necessary.

In addition, the City of Houston is one of the largest property owners in the Fourth Ward. Without its cooperation the necessary cohesiveness of the land cannot be accomplished. With cooperation among the landowners, the City of Houston, the housing authority, and the "developer," we can accomplish all of these goals.

(Continued on page 12)



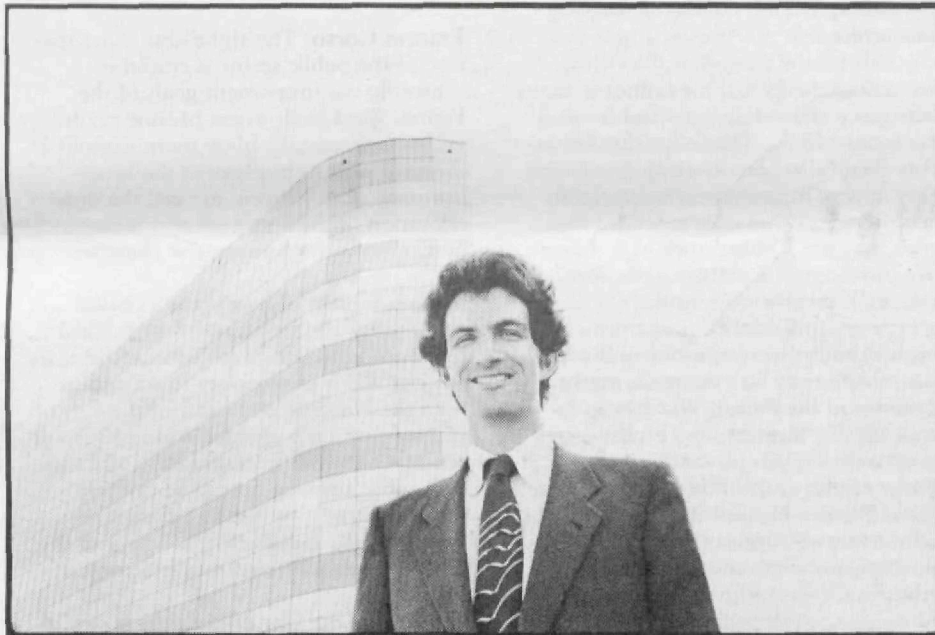
Gladys House, president, Freedman's Town Association

**Cite:** How do you maintain a neighborhood given the present atmosphere of pending change in Freedman's Town such that the current residents can remain?

**Gladys House:** You must first consider what you have to work with. Freedman's Town is Houston's oldest African-American community, and once interference by the mayor ceases, an historical district can become a reality. An historical district offers grants-in-aid to individuals wishing to have their buildings included in the district. It attracts economic and community development, offers tax breaks, and generates money for the community and the City of Houston as a tourist attraction. Such improvements would offer job-training programs for residents, thus bettering their opportunities to become financially independent. Once investors acknowledge the new and positive outlook

in this area, they will be more receptive to feeding monies into community projects. The Freedman's Town Association would act as a resource to apply and obtain small business loans for residents interested in starting their own businesses.

Housing co-ops are popular throughout the northeastern U.S., but are foreign to Houston. Yet once a group sensitive to the preservation of Freedman's Town presents a package that could be supported by opposing groups in Houston then implementation will be welcome. Co-oping allows renters eventually to purchase their unit, and it is a known fact that homeowners better maintain their dwellings than renters. Also, renters in Allen Parkway Village could be hired to rehabilitate their buildings, thus cutting costs, reducing unemployment, and encouraging the residents there to take a vested interest in their neighborhood and in their homes as future owners.



Carvel Glenn, vice president, Gemcraft Homes

**Cite:** What issues affect the attractiveness of the Fourth Ward for the development of housing by large residential developers?

**Carvel Glenn:** Following are seven issues which I believe affect the feasibility of residential development in the Fourth Ward.

The first is adequate identification of the target market. Examples of successful projects are numerous - from Greenway I, to Bryan Place (Dallas) to infill townhouses in Montrose/Heights. Each market segment places different emphasis on affordability, security, image, schools, unit size, building type, etc. Important to a development on expensive real estate is the depth of the market for high-density housing.

Land price is probably the most critical issue. I personally cannot envision a forest of high-rise condos or apartment buildings in the Fourth Ward. Although some innovative mid-rise prototypes might be introduced, I believe that a large development will be successful only if land can be priced such that a majority of the housing will be garden-apartment density or below.

The issue of appropriate building types relates not only to target market and financial feasibility, but also to the image of the area. It is important - assuming that rents or sales prices are not subsidized - that the development appeal to white-collar, middle-to-upper income people. The development must have an image separate from the Fourth Ward. Although

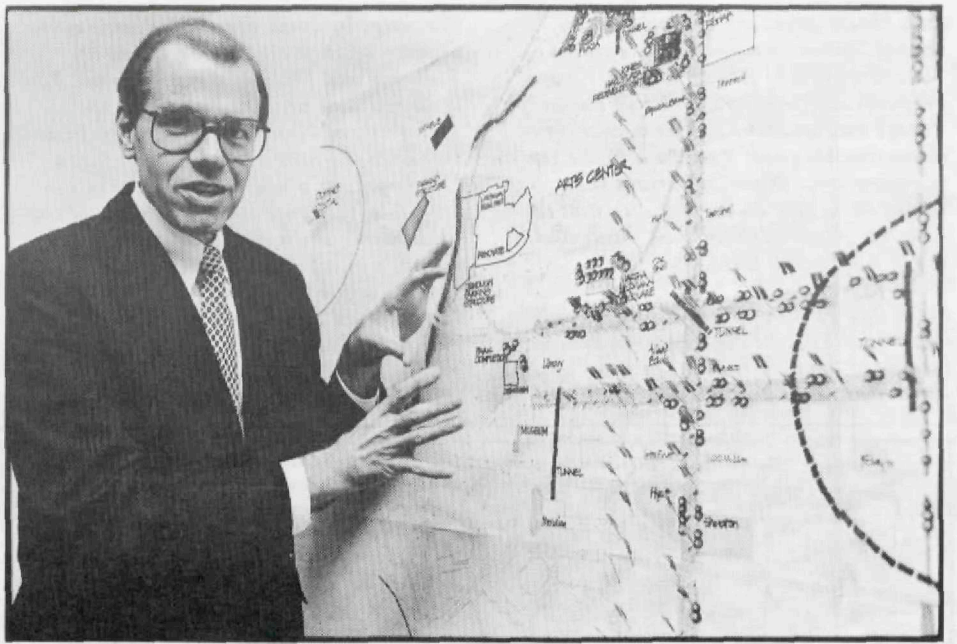
"yuppies" may feel like pioneers in redoing Montrose or Heights homes, those Heights neighborhoods are tamer than the Fourth Ward.

Security of property and personal safety are related issues which will be of concern to residents in a location like the Fourth Ward.

The target markets selected will determine the appropriate amenities to be included in the project(s), whether they be racquetball courts, pools, bars, or manicured gardens.

A favorite urban design phrase is *critical mass* or *development threshold*. No developer is going to want to be the first one to enter a risky market, and yet each will wish he had been if the first one succeeds. It would be a lot more comforting if some gentrification had already taken place, or if the risks were shared to create an instant "critical mass," such as the development of half of the Allen Parkway Village site.

The last issue is the *Houston economy*, both real numbers and perception of them. When there are 50-70 thousand used homes on the market and apartment occupancies are at 75 to 80 percent, there is not a lot of pent-up demand to fill the walls of a Fourth Ward development. Houston is retrenching, and conservative buyers concerned about resale in a slow market will not be adventurous. I don't see the market being ready for a large-scale development in the Fourth Ward until Houston wakes up again.



Robert Eury, president, Central Houston Incorporated

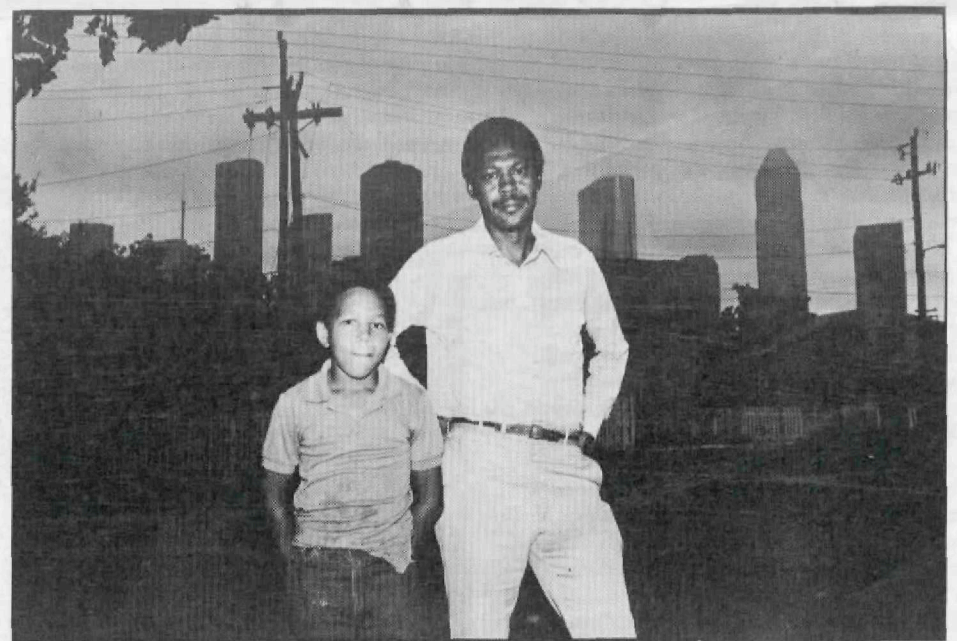
**Cite:** Central Houston, Inc. has published in recent months a plan for downtown Houston which provides a framework for the residential and commercial development along with the beautification of downtown. Does this plan take into consideration the adjacent Fourth Ward? Are the viability of Central Houston's planning goals affected by Fourth Ward development strategies?

**Robert Eury:** In May 1984, Central Houston, Inc., a non-profit corporation for the betterment of downtown, published *Interim Design Plan for Houston's Central Business District*. The principal goal of the plan is to sustain downtown as the principal business, cultural, social, and entertainment center of the Houston region. The plan cites an objective to "provide housing in or near downtown." One action, "to start a downtown housing initiative," cites the necessity of close coordination between the public and private sectors. In recognition of the embryonic nature of downtown housing, the plan relates that the next step is to determine whether a market exists, to find feasible locations, and to find incentives such as tax abate-

ment, utility provision, low-interest financing, grants, and/or land acquisition.

The working group responsible for the preparation of the plan agreed that there exists a number of possible locations for downtown housing. These locations include the southeast quadrant (near Root Square park), the Market Square area, the Cullen Center area, the Buffalo Bayou "island" area, the near north side, and the Fourth Ward. All of these areas would allow one to walk to work or to stores downtown.

Some time may be required before housing is developed and marketed in these areas. Central Houston's Interim Plan takes an opportunistic posture towards downtown housing, but it recognizes that housing is only one of many factors which would contribute to near-term increased vitality of the area. Central Houston is committed to design and planning and intends to prepare a more far-reaching vision for the central city within the next year. Such a plan will almost certainly speak with more specificity about the needs, opportunities, and initiatives for downtown housing, including the Fourth Ward.



Lenwood Johnson, president, Allen Parkway Village Resident Council, and son Len

**Cite:** Why does Allen Parkway Village need to survive for the next two years/for the next 20 years?

**Lenwood Johnson:** Allen Parkway Village (APV) will survive for the next two years even if nothing is done. However, there are problems that need addressing if it is to exist as decent housing. One problem is that the Housing Authority of the City of Houston (HACH) has an historically poor track record on maintenance. Another is the "war of attrition" - when families move out HACH closes the units without the Department of Housing and Urban Development's permission, despite a 10,000-family waiting list for subsidized housing.

One way for APV's problem to be addressed is if the tenants become organized. As an organized group, the tenants can attract public concerns and obtain legal help when laws are violated. The best hope is to have a paid tenant/management board with the power to hire and fire. This has been successful in places like St. Louis, Atlanta and Montgomery.

APV can only survive when taxpayers realize it is also in their self interest. Consider the fact that in 1940, the 1,000 units in APV were built for a few million dollars. Today, the same structurally sound buildings are slated for demolition with a replacement cost of around \$75 million. Added to this will be the cost to society of placing low-income families in suburban areas away from their support facilities. There is no room for profit-making motives of private interest in public housing as long as the taxpayers are paying the bill.

The taxpayers have to make the city define its stance on public housing for low-income citizens. As long as there is poverty in the nation, there will be a need for public housing. The taxpayers have a decision to make. Will they help provide for safe, decent, and sanitary housing, or will they pay the greater but hidden costs of families living in unstable environments, where education, health, and discipline, for example, become secondary in the struggle to get by. ■