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Lessons from San Antonio

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On 17 January Mayor Kathryn J. Whitmire announced formation of a 15-citizen steering committee to initiate a "Goals for Houston" process called "Visions for Houston." In forming this task force, the mayor adopted a program which has been proposed by numerous groups including the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. And, in so doing, the mayor drew upon the experience of San Antonio - that city's "Target '90" process represents a clear example of community-based public policy planning. The "Target '90" process and the resulting documentation, developed in San Antonio between the spring of 1983 and the summer of 1984, constitute a valuable precedent for the planning process Houston has just begun.

The value of this type of planning effort is that it offers a means for development of consensus and direction. For Houston, it is an opportunity to assess existing conditions, to generalize about assets, to recognize liabilities, and to develop a broad strategic sense of the future.

In San Antonio, "Target '90" grew out of the experience of acrimonious local politics in the 1970s; it was a way to bring the city together and develop common goals. As initiated in the spring of 1983, the process was to be inclusive, democratic, grass-roots-oriented; it was to recognize the cultural pluralism of San Antonio, and to seek unity of purpose through a diversity of ideas.

The primary theme of "Target '90" was quality of life. Within this theme, 12 broad areas were identified and 12 citizen task forces were created to focus on these areas: basic services, education, development, transportation, foreign trade, southern sector (inner city) development, utilities, the arts, human services, youth, transition to technology, and biosciences. The process of organizing the task forces, holding public meetings, reaching consensus, and preparing the final report took over a year and involved more than 500 citizen volunteers. Several thousand people participated in the process through public meetings. Ultimately 12 area objectives and 93 specific goals were identified.

This process, however, is only the first step. Further steps must be taken if plans are to become reality. Institutional mechanisms must be created in order to

see that plans and visions take actual (physical) shape and that irreplaceable assets are protected. A substantial part of the "Target '90" report involves implementation, and a "Target '90" Commission will carry out the "Target '90" process to see plans to fruition.

The creation of planning bodies, review boards, commissions, and agencies with adequate funding and authority to enforce decisions is an essential part of the process. In Houston, developing a broad-based vision of the future will be just an initial step, and the creation of institutional mechanisms to nurture and realize that vision - to continue the process - may be difficult. With the city's history of limited planning, an entirely new level of understanding of the purpose and effects of institutionalized guidelines will be necessary.

Even then, the ultimate determination of the future of any city still rests with individuals. Are policies followed? Are guidelines enforced? Again, the case of San Antonio is instructive. Incredible pressure was apparently brought to bear on the River Walk Commission in 1984 after it initially rejected a proposed 24-story hotel which did not meet urban design guidelines. Because the commission eventually gave in, the project is being built without changes and one stretch of the River Walk has been compromised. What may be worse, however, is the lesson for future projects - apparently, if sufficient pressure can be brought to bear, the expediency of the moment may win out over more subtle, longer-term priorities. Indeed, future enforcement of urban design guidelines anywhere on the River Walk may be much more difficult as a result. Although this does not bear directly on the visionary planning of "Target '90," it is nonetheless significant. After all, direction may be set by visionary goals and plans, but cities are built day-to-day, through many small incremental decisions.

There is risk in the mayor's proposal for a "Visions for Houston" process, but there is also tremendous opportunity. The time has come to take hold and shape Houston's future. As part of this process we should look to San Antonio (and to Dallas and Austin, as well as cities outside Texas). As we seek to shape our future we should not be afraid of good ideas no matter what their source. ■



Main Plaza, San Antonio, showing (left) San Fernando Cathedral, 1873, F. Giraud, architect and (right) Frost National Bank Building, 1922, Sanguinet and Staats, architects (Photo by Paul Hester)



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