

East César Chávez Neighborhood Planning Area:

Interview Write-Up



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The story of the East César Chávez neighborhood planning process is best told through a series of themes: the role of an outspoken organizer, the overwhelming interest in political activism, a truly neighborhood-driven process, and the difficulties of plan completion and implementation. These themes emerged from interviews conducted with a renter, a city planner, residents and business owners from the East César Chávez neighborhood.

The Organizer: The Importance of Local Leadership

The story of the East César Chávez neighborhood planning process cannot be separated from the story of Lori Renteria – a strong and outspoken neighborhood leader who has drawn both praise and criticism for her role in the neighborhood’s planning process. Renteria is credited with securing the East César Chávez neighborhood’s inclusion in the 1997 pilot program, encouraging participation among neighborhood residents and other stakeholders, keeping the process on track despite various obstacles and difficulties, and maintaining the energy and interest required to implement the goals and objectives identified in the plan. She has also been accused by a member of El Concilio, who worked with other East Austin Hispanic neighborhood activists in the El Pueblo Network to define and create a plan for their community before the city became involved in neighborhood planning, with co-opting the planning process and not representing the interests of the primarily low-income, Hispanic community. Regardless of their role in the neighborhood planning process or personal opinion of Renteria, our interviewees unanimously agreed that the neighborhood plan would not likely have come to fruition without the leadership of Renteria.

The acting division manager of neighborhood planning for the City of Austin, spoke to the difficulty of getting residents and other stakeholders involved in the neighborhood planning process. According to him, the City has attempted various ways of getting the public involved – from mass mailings, to going door-to-door, to meeting with stakeholder groups – with varied but usually limited success. The City has found the most effective way of engaging the public is to challenge the neighborhood leaders to make contact with residents and other stakeholders and personally invite them to participate. Well ahead of the curve and despite alleged threats of violence from El Concilio, who opposed the entire neighborhood planning process, Renteria was personally inviting residents to participate in the planning process from the very beginning. It was obvious to Renteria from the outset that the neighborhood leaders would have to engage the residents and especially the less active non-resident stakeholders. Says Renteria:

“Well the way we did it was we got four of us together on the planning committee and said hey lets form a list of non-profit agencies and churches—you know the different stakeholders and then divided them up. You know—[those]who knew them because we thought they could have some success in talking to them.”

This is exactly what was done to engage both non-resident stakeholders and residents.

Says a resident of East Austin and the chair of the East César Chávez Planning Team, of his first contact with Renteria while raking leaves in his front lawn:

She walks up and says something like ‘Do you care about crime and safety in your neighborhood?’ and I went ‘Yes’...’Do you care about ...’ and she had a litany of about five or six items, and I kept responding, ‘Yes, of course I care.’ Finally she pulls out a flier and thrusts it into my hand and said to come to the neighborhood planning meeting... Somebody asks us to participate ... and I realized that I had just gotten an invitation to, because of where I lived, to participate.

If getting residents involved in the planning process from the onset is difficult, keeping them interested, informed, and participating throughout the entire process may seem like an unachievable goal. The Neighborhood Planning Division Manager acknowledges that the City has attempted to streamline the neighborhood planning process in part because in the 2 to 2 ½ years it was taking to complete plans, resident interest and participation dwindled, especially when the process became bogged down by zoning or other issues. A renter in the East César Chávez neighborhood and two owners of businesses located in the East César Chávez neighborhood all credit planning team members and with keeping the process moving, and keeping residents involved and informed even when they were unable to attend regular meetings. According to one business owner interviewed,

If they wouldn't have put it together, it would have never happened without the Lori Renterias and the Sabinos and the Jorges ... these people were there week after week after week. They just kept prodding along, and you know I don't like this---change this and that and so forth [to make sure things were done right even though they required lots of time].

According to the manager of the neighborhood planning department, the goal of the neighborhood contact team is for its members to be “the shepherds of the plan and to monitor the implementation of it and to the extent they can lobby the city or whatever agency may be involved in implementing that item...” It was revealed at a recent Austin Neighborhoods Council (ANC) meeting that many neighborhoods have failed to implement the action items identified in their plans and blame this primarily on a lack of support by city staff. ECC planning team members recognized early that implementation of the action items would require strong lobbying from the members of the neighborhood, and have continued to be outspoken advocates for the neighborhood. The renter

interviewed for this story, who resides at the RBJ senior residential tower and serves on the neighborhood planning team, had the following to say about the team's lobbying efforts:

Lori especially has established a really good relationship with Senator Doggett's office. And it's really amazing that if something happens, if suddenly it looks like legislation's going to be passed that affects our plan, or if developers are going to do something that overrides the plan, if we alert the officials involved they will really listen. We have to stay watchful about it, but we can always get their attention about it, especially Lori, and do something about the situation.

Renteria, in turn, credits the plan for providing the neighborhood the legitimacy needed to approach political figures and entities to request support or funding. Says Renteria: "It is really easy to write a grant when you can say 'here on pg 12' it says this supports the plan."

Our interviewees all agree that the determination of the planning team members played an invaluable role in the East César Chávez neighborhood planning process and in the ongoing struggle to implement the goals and objectives identified in the plan. The team's, and particularly Lori Renteria's political initiative and willingness to devote endless time and energy to organizing and fighting for the neighborhood was unanimously identified as critical to the creation of the neighborhood plan and ongoing attempts to implement its goals and objectives.

The Politics of ECC, Inside and Out

The East César Chávez neighborhood was one of three areas chosen to participate in the pilot neighborhood planning program. Not only was it one of the first neighborhoods to go through the planning process, but it is also one of the strongest

neighborhood teams politically. When asked what it is that makes the César Chávez neighborhood different from other neighborhoods, the chair of the neighborhood planning team answered that their team was in fact different than others, primarily because

[The team members] are all professional politicians, not in the sense that they are running for office, but that they understand the value of one vote. They don't fall subject to the disillusionment when people say they can't have an impact. This group believes that one vote is enough to make a difference. They just have this courageous individual belief that they can impact elections and city government. They are fearless in that belief that they can make a difference and they will stand up to any opposition.

It would seem then that the political influence that this group holds is to a large extent due to the large degree of political activism evident within East Austin residents. Much of this political activism seems to be due to the hardships and discrimination that residents in East Austin have borne in the past. The renter interviewed speaks to this when asked whether or not the City is responsive to and respectful of the neighborhood plan:

I don't know, I'm kind of jaded. I just feel like they dump on us over here. The people that work on the issues are very concerned [about] the attitude of the city itself...I feel like anything they don't want over there they can just send it over here. What I'm working on right now is there's a halfway house in our neighborhood and we've been fighting...they've been sending straight from TDC to us sex offenders and violent offenders, and I've been fighting them. And do you think any of the neighborhoods in Austin would tolerate anything like that? Of course not. But we have to have it shoved down our throats...No other part of town would have to fight so hard against something like that.

Her story of fighting discrimination is echoed by the chair of the planning team. He claims that he currently lives in East Austin in large part due to discrimination he experienced in other parts of town, and would rather live in an area "where people will smile at us and won't think we're stealing everything." He continues to say that, though

he feels more at home in the minority community of East Austin, he still encounters discrimination from time to time.

I have been stopped by the police, and I have a different, very clear understanding, that when I get stopped in East Austin, and it's at night, I behave very differently than I would any other time. Because I understand that because of the color of my skin, that without knowing anything about who I am, a policeman might have a preconceived notion about what I'm doing...I'm telling you these things because it certainly will flavor my involvement with community involvement as it is now.

It would seem then, that residents in East Austin are more politically active than the average Austinite because they have in many ways been forced to. In fact, when asked about the positive elements and the strengths of neighborhood planning in East César Chávez, the renter interviewed responds that the neighborhood planning process has given these East Austin residents an even stronger voice politically:

We really have the ear of the mayor and the city council...the county commissioner, and Senator Doggett. And it's really amazing that if something happens, if suddenly our plan looks like legislation's going to be passed that affects our plan...if we alert the officials involved they will really listen.

Discrimination and inequity seems to not only be responsible for the political activism apparent in East Austin, but also seems at least partially responsible for East César Chávez being chosen as a pilot neighborhood planning program in the first place. Comments from the manager of the neighborhood planning division seem to indicate a consciousness on the part of city staff and officials of the historical inequities suffered in this area, and his comments imply that a desire to cure these inequities was perhaps one of the motivations behind this neighborhood being chosen as one of the first to be planned.

[The] re-zonings are also a very important thing...in the East Austin neighborhood the rezoning was a very important thing because you had a lot of

property that was over-zoned with industrial so in that neighborhood zoning was huge. In some of these other neighborhoods we are doing kind of cosmetic things as far as the zoning is concerned and yet we spend months doing that and kind of when all is said and done you go well ok what kind of change did we really affect here but again East Austin had a different dynamic to it. It was worth spending the time on the zoning in those areas because it was just unacceptable some of the zoning patterns and land use patterns that had arisen from you know a mistake made back in 1929.

However, a representative of El Concilio argues that down-zoning industrial properties to residential uses with accessory dwelling units (“granny flats”) should not have been such a large priority for the neighborhood. In fact, he asserts that it has harmed rather than helped the community, and that El Concilio opposed these downzoning efforts. He states that

The city rezoned to allow garage apartments even though they would increase property values and force existing residents out of the neighborhood...The down-zoning of property in the neighborhood created increased property values that are forcing long time residents out.

A Neighborhood-Driven Process

One very important, very prominent theme that became apparent when speaking with those involved in the East Cesar Chavez Neighborhood Plan was just how neighborhood-led the process really was. When asked what she felt was the turning point in the planning process, Lori Renteria speaks to the neighborhood-driven nature of the East Cesar Chavez plan:

Well, they sent us really good planners who may have been well book read, but they let us do our own thing. We had to put together our team and make agreements with the city...The planners came to us and asked what we needed instead of telling us what their vision for the neighborhood was. They let us self identify everything.

The Chair of the neighborhood planning team also identified this neighborhood-driven process as a key element to the plan's success, and like Lori, points to this neighborhood ownership of the process as a key turning point.

I think most of us understood that the neighborhood planning process was a city-driven activity. And there was a point within about a year of the group working together that it dawned on everyone that the process was ours and not the city's, and that's what made the quantum leap for us as a group, rather than the meetings being city-driven, we realized that this was not a city driven process, it was neighborhood driven. All the city needed to do was tell us what date we needed to finish the plan, step back, and let us finish the plan. They were a resource to us...if we needed help in terms of looking at city codes, interpretation...that was their role. Otherwise the role of putting together the plan was ours. Even the process itself was ours to determine, as long as we were moving forward, and there was a very subtle change after about nine months where we realized that we were in control....So with us, the City played a resource role and not an advocate role. Once we got that straightened out it went real smooth.... Once we understood that they were not the grand arbiters and decision makers in the process, then the focus could become us as a group, then we could get really knee deep into the complicated discussions that we had regarding specific zoning, what we wanted for the Saltillo area

Rather than directly leading the planning process, therefore, the City's planning department allowed the ECC planning team to take charge of their own process, and primarily served as a resource for the neighborhood. The participants attribute much of the success of the East Cesar Chavez Plan to this neighborhood-driven process, but they also claim that without the City's guidance, the plan would never have come about. Lori Renteria speaks to the crucial role that the City played in bringing the neighborhood together:

We are a very dysfunctional neighborhood. Had we not had the city resources, making the copies, declaring neutral space—it was critical, we would have never have been able to pull it off. We needed a neutral party to help facilitate bringing this together...

In fact, when asked how he thought the neighborhood planning process could be improved, the chair of the East Cesar Chavez Planning team remarked that the City

should serve as more of a resource to planning teams, more thoroughly providing them with the tools and training necessary to plan their neighborhoods on their own.

Absolutely, they could do a lot more preparing the neighborhood before hand. Not the city doing it, but bringing in some outside training. That falls in line with what I was saying earlier, the city as a resource. They are not the ones in charge of the neighborhood planning process, that's what I hear with some of the plans that haven't worked so well.

He stressed that the City should be more of "a resource," particularly in preparing neighborhood groups for the heated emotions and the high pressures inherently involved with planning. The manager of the neighborhood planning division agrees that the City should be a strong resource, and claims that the City is already playing a part. "We facilitate many of the meetings, we also can kind of work with the community in where to meet, we do have an outline of the process itself which is flexible to an extent we try to realize every neighborhood has its own characteristics." Comments from neighborhood participants seem to indicate that neighborhood planning teams would like to see more city support, however, as they largely felt unprepared for the planning process. A business owner interviewed for this story states that

I think from the very beginning, the frustration was that there was not really a plan. It's difficult to develop a plan and ask people to do that when they really have no understanding of what a plan entails. The City of Austin is included ... I wish they would have come up with examples and said, hey, here's what has worked in Los Angeles, or San Antonio, or Dallas. This [is the] kind of prototype of what you are up against. You know this is kind of prototypical comparison for you to use. [César Chávez] did it blind, they didn't know what they looking for.

Cementing his point after further being pressed as to whether the neighborhood itself could have done more to compensate for the city, he stated, "They couldn't ... I mean

those people were having meetings twice a week ... I mean every time that they'd have a meeting they took advantage of it.”

The participants interviewed, therefore, identify this neighborhood-driven process as key to the success of the ECC Neighborhood Plan. However, several interviewees noted that over the years, neighborhood planning in Austin has in fact changed, and while the process was very neighborhood-focused in the early years when East Cesar Chavez underwent the process, it has since changed into a more City-led initiative. ECC participants attribute many of the current conflicts with neighborhood planning in Austin to this change in process. Lori Renteria states that

[Neighborhood planning] has morphed over the years.... They've totally changed the process. It used to be that the staff was there to support the neighbors. Now it's the neighbors are there to support the staff in writing the plan and deciding what the plan will be. So it's completely ... backwards right now.

Cooperation with Surrounding Neighborhoods: Seeing the City as a Whole

One often remarked upon shortcoming of neighborhood planning in Austin is the perceived inability of the neighborhood planning system to account for larger, city-wide concerns. Members of the East Cesar Chavez Neighborhood Planning Team seem to be sensitive to these interjurisdictional concerns, however. When asked how exactly neighborhood plans should integrate with each other and with the planning goals of the larger city, the chair of the planning team states that integration between plans should be accomplished via neighborhoods working cooperatively with surrounding neighborhoods, rather than working in a singular manner without consideration of what occurs across planning area boundaries. Said the chair,

There should be integrity within the plan, within the planning process so that the neighborhood ... recognizes [there are] four other areas-- north, south, east, and west areas, that bound [it]. To say ... you don't really care what goes on across the street [or somewhere else close by], doesn't really make sense. We fortunately had people that understood that, and as we planned we didn't stop at our boundaries, but looked across those boundaries and did the best we could to work with other neighborhood groups, and tried to integrate our plan with all of the other plans going on."

Plan Implementation: "Shouldering" the Responsibility

Another area of concern remarked upon by all interviewees was the question of implementation of the plan once the document had been completed. The planning division manager claims that the East César Chávez plan has perhaps been more thoroughly followed through than other areas, in part because of the efforts of a handful of people concerned and willing enough to embrace the extra weight on their "shoulders" to carry it out. Lori Renteria claims that the ECC planning team is

very big on implementation. There is an implementation tracking chart for every neighborhood and it says who is responsible to do what. [We use that chart] and our endorsement policy states if it is not listed as an action step in the plan, then the proposal has to go through this lengthy sixty day process [to be approved]. So we are true to the plan so that anyone who comes to us asking for endorsements—we get a lot [of them] ... we direct them to the plan."

However, the planning division manager also believes that full implementation will be very difficult.

I don't think a plan is ever going to be fully implemented. There are just a lot of things in these plans. I think the implementation of the sidewalks [has] been successful for the most part. A lot of the success of [the plan] is quite honestly going to be put on the shoulders of the neighborhood itself because ... it's a very important step in just documenting what the concerns are in the neighborhood, what needs to be addressed ... because a lot of times until you have something on paper to put into a plan ... you just ... have a lot of people that haven't ... had a chance to get together and express what that is.

This concern with implementation has paid dividends to the neighborhood according to a business owner who also attributes much of the neighborhood order to the neighborhood planning process. From his observations, East César Chávez has changed throughout the past 20 years. He claims to have

watched two people get stabbed ... on 6th Street” during his early years, but now, he happily points out, “you’ve got a lighted work way, you’ve got nice restaurants ... like Darios, and some of those that have been there for a long time—but you know, its clean, its safe, its well patrolled. For the most part it’s a crime free area. It wasn’t always that way.

He acknowledges that these benefits are a direct result of the efforts of the resident planners who were courageous enough to accept and act upon the challenge laid before them. Other successes resulting from the implementation of the East César Chávez Neighborhood Plan include the designation of several new mixed use areas and the ability to participate in financial assistance programs. Says Lori Renteria,

The major success was the mixed use zone, because prior to [it, our] small businesses were falling apart because they were too close to residences and didn’t have parking. They couldn’t make any improvements to their small businesses and residences ... couldn’t get any building permits to fix their properties. Then sidewalk people [as a result of the plan], came and said we’re going to build thirty-five sidewalks in your neighborhood--- where do you want them? [Next], the Parks Department ... came and said we’re going to spend \$150,000 on amenities---where do you want them. It is really easy to write a grant when you can say “here on pg 12, it says this supports the plan.”

As stated above, political activism and community involvement seems to be strong in East Austin. The renting representative on the planning team speaks to this sense of civic duty and community involvement when discussing her involvement with the neighborhood:

If there’s an event like a clean up, I help ... with that, or if there’s events that are interesting ... I ... go. And then there are a lot of meetings. We have our team meeting once each month, and I go to the commanders’ forum once a month

However, despite the involvement of so many who care deeply about the neighborhood, she also reports that this type of community involvement can get very tiring, and she is often frustrated that more people from the neighborhood are not involved. She claims that she would like to see more community outreach so as to encourage more residents to participate, in part so as to relieve some of the pressures off of the few who devote so much of their time and work so hard. Many residents are hesitant to get too involved in the neighborhood planning process however. The business owner interviewed for this story commented that, “You go to these meetings and there are words that don’t make any sense ... unless you go to these meetings constantly—you know there a lot of people who make this there profession—you have to study for hours in advance before a meeting to understand the different meanings of things.” Another resident explained his hesitancy as follows: “It just sounds like more meetings to go to—you don’t want to spend all your time going to meetings.”

Conclusions

Many lessons emerged as a result of our conversations with those involved in the East César Chávez neighborhood planning process, the most apparent of which being the power of one individual to have an impact and encourage residents to organize politically so as to represent the neighborhood that they care about. As one interviewee stated, this is the place where their friends and families live, a place that is close to their sense of self, and this connection, this role that “place” has in one’s sense of self must be respected. However, it is also apparent that the planning process, and particularly the implementation stage of the process, may be a bit overwhelming for many resident

planners, and more support from the city may be needed so as to relieve some of the pressures from overworked and overburdened citizens.

ECC Key Learnings/Best Practices

- An outspoken leader can direct and help hold the process together but will be a lightning rod for both criticism and praise.
- A truly neighborhood-driven process can result in a real sense of ownership over both the process and the plan.
- Many view the City's ideal role as that of a resource for neighborhood planning teams, and feel that this role could be greatly enhanced.
- More citizen training regarding planning terms, the planning process, and leadership and conflict resolution may be needed to more thoroughly prepare residents for the planning process.
- Neighborhoods may not have all of the resources (or time) to act as shepherds of their plans.
- Volunteers are a great resource until they wear out—the planning and implementation processes can be time consuming and fatiguing for overly-stretched volunteers.
- Simple summary sheets with key terms and definitions can help newcomers participate in planning meetings.
- Neighborhoods need to cooperate with other neighborhoods and see the community as a whole city
- The City requiring a Neighborhood Planning area to bring together the diverse stakeholders can be a helpful catalyst for community collaboration
- A representative and inclusive planning process that produces a united voice can greatly empower a neighborhood when confronting issues before City Council.