Houston Centered Policy Challenge Prompts

Complete Communities
The Complete Communities Initiative is a pilot program launched by Mayor Sylvester Turner that aims to revitalize historically under-resourced communities in Houston. The program involves working with community programs and neighborhood residents to improve access to quality education, affordable housing, transportation options, healthcare, and other opportunities. Five distinct neighborhoods—Acres Homes, Gulfton, Second Ward, Near Northside, and Third Ward—were selected for the first round of this initiative. The Complete Communities Initiative takes a “place-based” approach to community development, in which affordable housing is part of a larger neighborhood revitalization effort that includes development of and access to other amenities. While the Initiative aims to revitalize underserved neighborhoods, some local residents and others worry that it could open the door to gentrification and rising real estate values/property taxes, pushing out long-time residents who the initiative was designed to benefit.

How can we create affordable housing and ensure its sustainability in these complete community areas?

Flood Resilience
Last year, Hurricane Harvey’s unprecedented flooding in Houston brought over 50 inches of rain to the city in the span of a few days, leaving thousands of homes flooded and millions of residents displaced. In the wake of Harvey, there has been a reduction in the amount of affordable housing in the city, as over 300,000 affordable housing units were wiped out in the flood, nearly doubling the city’s need for affordable housing. This number includes both multifamily rentals and single-family homes that are designated as affordable housing by the city. Much of the city’s affordable housing is located in flood-prone areas, where land is often less expensive. As one of three 500-year floods to hit the city over the past three years, Harvey has introduced a host of new housing problems to Houston, including high housing instability for low-income renters, flood-resistance ordinances for new construction and repair that could be costly for low-income homeowners, and high risk homeownership as lower-income individuals purchase lower-demand housing in areas with frequent flooding.

How can we design and locate affordable housing so that it isn’t susceptible to future flooding?

Community Health
Recent research suggests that place of residence can have a significant impact on health and wellbeing. Low-income and low-resource neighborhoods are often selected as locations for industrial production and other health and environmental hazards, and research shows that residents of these areas suffer from higher rates of environmentally-triggered health problems. As a result, long-time and low-income residents with fiscal restraints are vulnerable to poorer health outcomes. In particular, Houston’s lack of zoning laws has resulted in a concentration of low-income neighborhoods and housing near environmental health risks, such as superfund sites, concrete batch plants, petro plants, freeways, and
high-traffic zones. This proximity to pollutants holds significant implications for the community health of low-income, poorly zoned neighborhoods.

**How can we improve community health and mitigate environmental risks in low-income neighborhoods without displacing these communities?**

**Special Populations**

Like most forms of social policy, housing policies often overlook or exclude populations with unique needs from affordable housing. Elderly citizens, people with disabilities, transgender individuals, and the formerly incarcerated are just a few of the special populations who struggle to find suitable housing. Special populations face three primary barriers when trying to access affordable housing: they often need specially-designed housing, are likely to be low-income, and may face discrimination in the housing market. For example, elderly populations often live on fixed incomes and have less financial flexibility when choosing where to live, which is an important consideration in housing policy. Similarly, housing policy legally prohibits discrimination based on disability but lacks specific provisions or assistance for enforcing these protections. Furthermore, formerly incarcerated individuals face significant income barriers and discrimination in accessing affordable housing.

**How can we create policy that ensures that special populations, such as those mentioned above, can attain suitable affordable housing?**

**Housing Segregation**

Houston has a long-standing history of residential segregation; the historical *de jure* segregation of the African-American and Hispanic communities has led to contemporary *de facto* segregation along both class and racial/ethnic lines. This has had disproportionate consequences for the residents of low-income, minority-majority neighborhoods, where practices like “redlining” and discriminatory rental practices have amplified the difficulties of finding affordable housing.

Within Houston’s housing policy sphere, some people think that the best way to alleviate residential segregation is to develop affordable housing in “high opportunity neighborhoods,” while others, such as Mayor Turner, believe in building affordable housing in traditionally-segregated and low-opportunity neighborhoods in order revitalize those communities. The “moving to opportunity” approach can result in opposition from residents of wealthier neighborhoods, who often use “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) arguments to protest developments that would bring low-income, minority residents into the neighborhood.

**How can affordable housing policy in Houston be structured to ameliorate inequalities between and within racially and class-segregated neighborhoods?**