

HISTORY



"Residents March in Protest: Sunnyside Fights 'Instant Slums,'" *Houston Post*, November 8, 1966. Photo credit: RG D 0006N.11-07-66Fr.18a, Houston Public Library, HMRC.

Overcoming 100 Years of Harm by Government Policies

A century of cumulative public policy enacted by the city has led to many of Sunnyside's current challenges. The city must not only acknowledge this, but also ensure current and future policies do not have the same discriminatory effect. The city must now actively remediate the harms.



1915 (pg. 18)

Sunnyside subdivision platted as racially segregated neighborhood by white developer/city councilman

1918 (pg. 18)
Sunnyside Colored County School (grades 1-5) established

1929 (pg. 15)
Houston Planning Department formally adopts residential racial segregation as city policy



1937 (pg. 23)
City opens 300-acre Holmes Road Dump in Sunnyside

1917 (pg. 18)
Severe racial oppression in Houston sparks riots and decades of Jim Crow practices, pressuring black families to relocate outside city limits

1927 (pg. 19)
Sunnyside School incorporated into HISD. Students allowed to continue attend Yates High School located 3 miles away. No transportation provided.

1930s (pg. 16)
HOLC redlines home mortgage lending in Sunnyside

1956 (pg. 21): City annexes Sunnyside, imposes taxes, but does not provide sewer, water, drainage, sidewalks, streetlights or other public services

1957 (pg. 22): Sunnyside double-taxed

1964 (pg. 24):
Houston opens Reed Dump in Sunnyside (78 acres)

1967 (pg. 23):
Holmes Road incinerator opens

1969 (pg. 24):
City expands Reed Dump

1967 (pg. 27)
City and HUD begin building massive numbers of government subsidized low-income apartments in Sunnyside, residents protest

2010 (pg. 64)
Sims Bayou flood mitigation puts more Sunnyside residents in flood zone

2013 (pg. 29)
Chapter 42 passed by city council, threatening community character

2013 (pg. 47)
Sunnyside named 8th highest crime neighborhood in U.S.



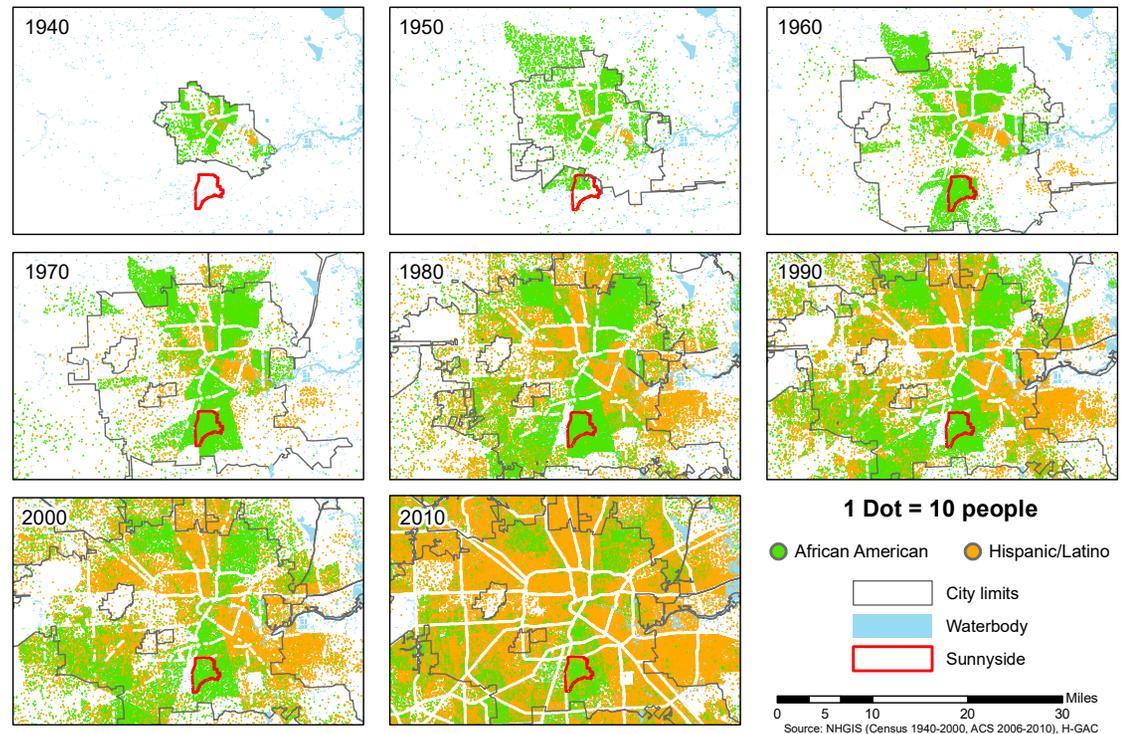
A SELF-SUSTAINING COMMUNITY

For more than thirty years following Emancipation, African-Americans in East Texas and Western Louisiana moved from plantation to plantation seeking economic opportunity and freedom. In the late nineteenth century, the region's rural lumber camps and sawmills offered a better wage. Ultimately, the promise of jobs, education and social opportunity in Houston became a magnet for African-Americans and a migration of unprecedented scale began. African-Americans moved in massive numbers from rural East Texas and Louisiana to Houston during the first half of the twentieth century.

Houston promoted itself to blacks in the early 1900s through newspapers such as the African-American newspaper *Informer* as a place with "unexcelled industrial opportunities."⁹ This largely meant work in the city's port and railroad yards, but also in residential domestic and laboring jobs.

Extended families followed workers over time, in a pattern that immigrants across the world have long followed and which sociologists refer to today as "chain migration." An able-bodied breadwinner would move first and send for close-and later extended-family members to join them in the city. The extended families endured huge sacrifices

⁹ Bullard, R. 1987. *Invisible Houston: The Black Experience in Boom and Bust*.



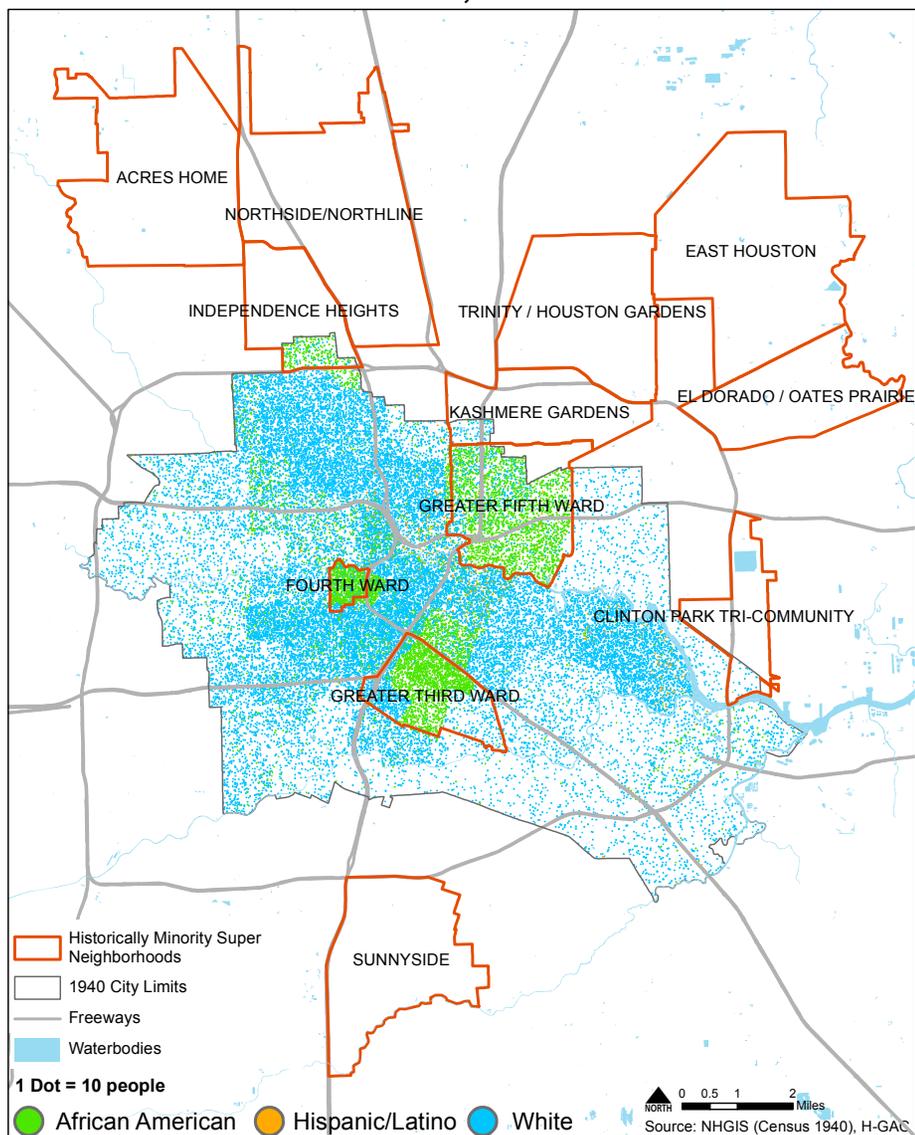
Distribution of African-American and Hispanics in Houston, Texas 1940 - 2010

in their migration, often "doubling-up" in a dwelling while family members sought jobs, saved their money and searched for a home of their own. Immigrants brought from their experiences on the plantations and in the lumber camps three things: 1) a strong desire to maintain a unified family, 2) a desire to rise out of poverty and 3) a quest for safety and escape from white oppression. The latter would prove elusive.

The era of the great African-American

migration to Houston saw unprecedented acts of racial violence, discrimination and the formal legal establishment of segregation through state and local laws. Reacting negatively to the masses of new African-Americans pouring into the city from the countryside, the Houston City Council passed an ordinance segregating street cars. Laws were enacted that frustrated African-Americans' right to vote. At the same time, Houston police stepped up oppression and violence directed toward African-Americans.

Distribution of Race in Houston, Texas 1940



Housing opportunities for African-Americans within Houston's city limits were extremely limited in the early 1900s, partly due to the city's encouragement of segregation. Early African-American communities soon grew overcrowded and blighted by undesirable land uses such as incinerators and landfills, leaving many families searching for a better quality of life. They found it in Sunnyside and other African-American suburban neighborhoods, such as Acres Homes and Independence Heights.

Historians point to the cumulative effect as triggering the deaths of twenty people in one of the most violent and significant race riots in the nation's history, the Houston Riot of 1917. Following the violence, lynchings and Klu Klux Klan activities rapidly escalated. By 1929, the Houston Planning Commission strongly encouraged housing segregation in a 1929 report that stated "because of long established racial prejudices, it is best for both races that living areas be segregated" even though city efforts to force residential racial segregation had been rare prior to the turn of the century.¹⁰ At the urging of real estate professionals and developers, whites systematically placed racial deed restrictions in their property deeds prevented the sale of their property to African-Americans.

The established residential centers of African-American population in the Fifth, Sixth and Fourth Wards were severely overcrowded as a result of this great migration. Most of these areas were also blighted by incinerators and landfills, incompatible industrial uses, rail yards, polluting factories, severe overcrowding, deplorable slum-like living conditions and the deplorable housing conditions maintained by predatory absentee landlords. Yet, many of these migrants, constrained by Jim Crow segregation and

¹⁰ Houston City Planning Department, 1929. Report of the City Planning Commission. Houston: City of Houston, pg. 25 in Bullard, R. 1987. *Invisible Houston: The Black Experience in Boom and Bust*, pg. 18.

poverty, continued to press into Houston's established racial ghettos where mostly white slumlords rented decrepit "shotgun houses" for inflated costs. Conditions in these established settlements quickly became even worse though overcrowding and rapidly increasing rents.

Other African-American immigrants, joined by some longer-term residents seeking to escape the deteriorating conditions in Houston's African-American ghettos, sought to create new African-American communities on the outskirts of Houston.

The Sunnyside community was originally settled from 1910 through 1945, a time when other African-American subdivisions were being developed outside of the city limits. Acres Homes and Independence Heights are two others that presented an affordable and attractive alternative to the overcrowded and increasingly higher-cost African-American segregated communities within the city limits. They offered residents the opportunity to own a home in a rural, exurban setting. The fact that they were outside the city limits meant they offered their residents a degree of safety, dignity, autonomy and independence not found in Houston's ghettos. These African-American suburbs gave their residents an ability to find relief, at least when they were at home, from some of the city's pervasive Jim Crow laws and exposure to city police and Klan oppression.

African-American suburban communities were created in significant numbers between 1910 and 1940 throughout the American Southwest, according to Andrew Wiese in his book, *Places of their Own: African-American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*:

"African-Americans struggled to create places of their own. In metropolitan areas dominated by whites, they sought to use suburban space to their advantage, to satisfy their needs as well as their aspirations... Thousands of black suburbanites objected to the quality of life in many city neighborhoods, desiring environments reminiscent of the small towns and countryside from which most had come. Low incomes and housing discrimination often thwarted these designs, but where they could, black families shaped their surroundings to suit them...

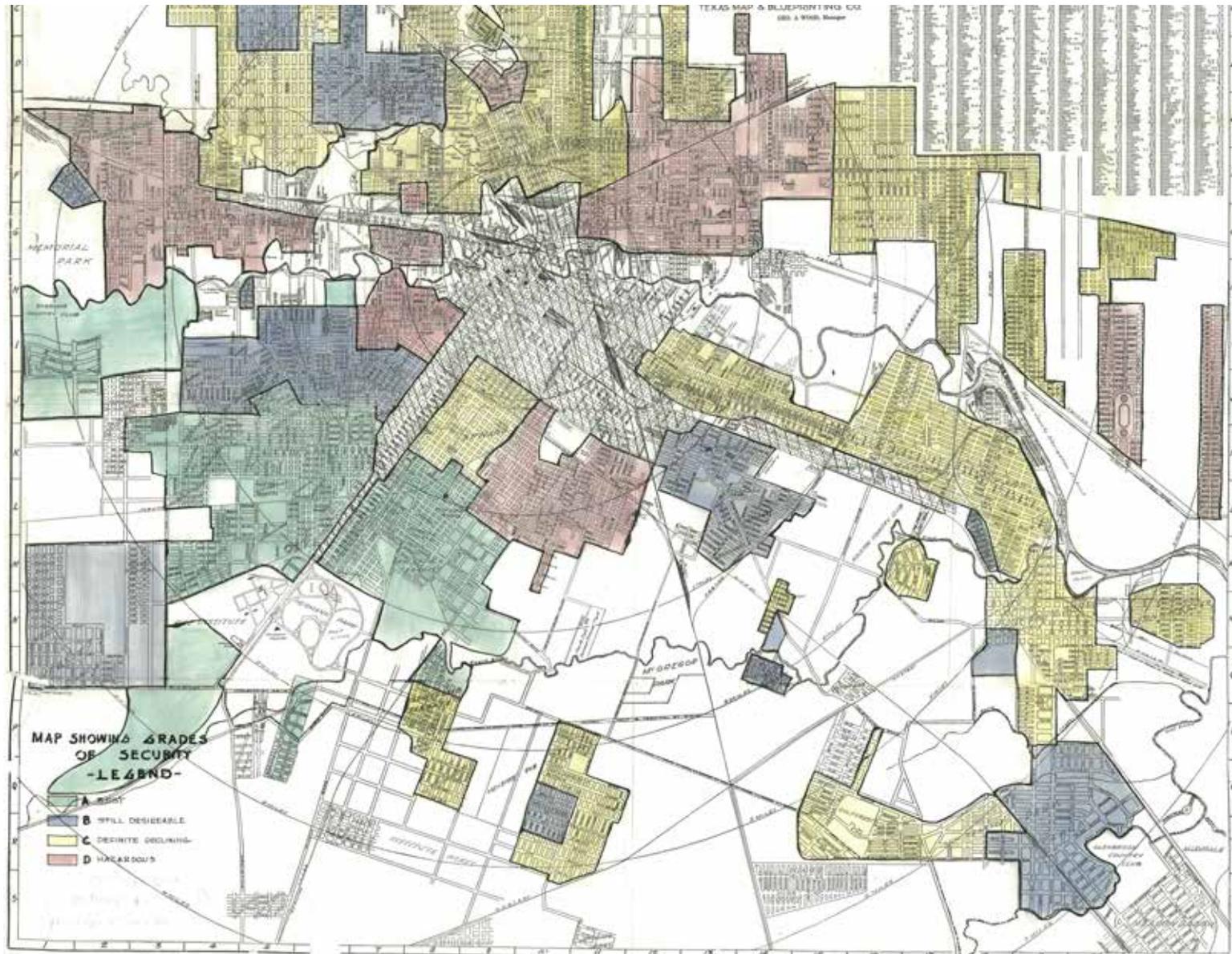
"If race and racism shaped early black suburbanization, suburban life itself tended to reinforce migrants' racial identities. Held at arm's length by white suburbanites, African-Americans relied on their own resources. They established separate institutions, worshiped in separate churches, and socialized in a predominantly black milieu. Politically, they organized to overcome racial inequality as members of race- and place-based communities."

The pioneering African-American historian Carter G. Woodson described suburban African-American communities like Sunnyside in 1930:

"In most of them there are only a few comfortable homes, a small number of stores, a church or two, a school, and a post office. The population is not rich enough to afford taxes to lay out the place properly, pave the streets, and provide proper drainage and sanitation."

Andrew Wiese cites a 1932 panel of experts on "Negro Housing" that described, "residential neighborhoods in 'outlying territories where Negroes are able to buy cheap land and build for themselves homes from whatever materials they can find, often a room or two at a time." Describing a subdivision near Houston, the committee wrote:

"There is another class of people buying out six or eight miles from town. There is an acreage division out there [probably Acres Homes] which they sell in 1-acre tracts, and a good many people have gone out there . . . The type of people who buy have their work in town and do not make enough to own and run a car, but they hear the cheap prices quoted and jump at it . . . It is just land out in the country" without gas, water, or paved streets."



Homeowner's Loan Corporation Security Map via U.S. National Archives, circa 1930s. The map was used to inform mortgage providers of where they could find the "best" areas in which to lend. Green areas represented new areas with no sign of unwanted ethnic or racial infiltration. Blue areas were considered stable for many years to come. Yellow areas were "definitely declining," while red were "hazardous." The yellow area farthest south on the map is OST.

The community's first subdivision, Sunnyside Place, was platted in 1915 by H.H. Holmes, a white former city councilman and real estate developer.¹¹ The first Sunnyside residents were excited to find an affordable neighborhood south of the city, where property had "always been considered as choice, since most of the restricted additions for white people were located [south of downtown]."¹² The 1,200 lots in Sunnyside were larger than those in the older wards of the city, a welcome relief to the inner-city overcrowding. Yet they were platted to be smaller than the adjacent, more affluent and white Brookhaven subdivision to provide an affordable option to working class families.

Almost without exception, banks would not make loans to African-Americans to buy land and finance the construction of their homes and businesses. By the early 1930's, when New Deal programs were established to provide government support for home purchase lending, the federal agency

11 Coincidentally, the platting of the first subdivision in Sunnyside aligns with a heightened period of black anger over Jim Crow and the Camp Logan Riots. In 1917, the Army ordered a group of African-American soldiers from New Mexico to guard the construction of the new military installation, Camp Logan, in Houston. Since Jim Crow laws had not been enforced in New Mexico, the soldiers were angered by the unequal treatment they received. Word of police brutality against Corporal Baltimore, 150 men marched on Houston, firing at White civilians and targeting police officers. Seventeen people were killed in the riot.

12 Whidby, T.E. 1938. A study of the Sunnyside School, its pupils and the community. Essay



overseeing these loans drew maps with red lines around "undesirable areas" where loans were not made.

These areas in Houston correspond almost exclusively with the city's African-American neighborhoods. Areas designed as "desirable" for home loans are the neighborhoods where African-Americans were legally excluded from buying property by the ubiquitous racial deed restrictions. While evidence is no longer available, it is likely that the people who bought the lots in Sunnyside Place and the other subdivisions that eventually comprised today's Sunnyside community had to depend on high interest rate loans in the form of land sales contracts from the white man who sold the lots. The financing for building a home



Terry's Grocery & Market at 4202 Stassen Street in Sunnyside. Pictured left is Ms. Mildred Wallace in the 1940s; above Mrs. Girthia Terry, wife of Elbert Terry, and some of her grandchildren in the 1960s. Photo credit: MSS0226-001 and MSS0266-002, Houston Public Library, HMRC.

was a second huge problem. Some lumber yards offered African-Americans high interest credit to finance building materials.

Yet despite these barriers and struggles, Sunnyside residents in the early years were almost always owners of their land and homes. The few who did not were often long-term renters struggling to make a living and did not have basic utility amenities.¹³

By 1938, there were two grocery stores, one auto repair shop and two churches serving 92 homes. Most residents worked in "common labor," while others were cooks, maids,

13 Pruitt, B. 2013. The other great migration: The movement of rural African-Americans to Houston, 1900-1941. Texas A&M University Press, pg. 46.

chauffeurs, and porters. Others were farmers, teachers, preachers and businessmen.¹⁴ The early business establishments in Sunnyside nurtured “self-reliance, hope, and racial autonomy,” even though white-controlled businesses outside of the community were markedly more successful.”¹⁵

Although better housing, space, light and air conditions could be found in Sunnyside, infrastructure was still desperately lacking. Those living in Sunnyside were in an essentially rural area undergoing suburbanization with no paved streets and only septic tanks and water wells available. A long-time resident recalls that roads were primarily “mud” in the 1950s.

14 Whidby, T.E. 1938. A study of the Sunnyside School, its pupils and the community. Essay.

15 Pruitt, B. 2013. *The other great migration: The movement of rural African-Americans to Houston, 1900-1941*. Texas A&M University Press, pg. 73.



4204 Stassen Street in Sunnyside, 1933. Photo credit: MSS0226-020, Houston Public Library, HMRC.

In 1918, H.H. Holmes donated nine lots to Harris County for a community school. However, residents had to continue to press the county to finally build a one-room school called Sunnyside Colored School, which offered first through fifth grade. Twelve students were in attendance the first year, with enrollment up to 52 students by 1938. The school became part of the Houston Independent School District in 1927. Jack Yates High School opened to Sunnyside students at that time, but transportation was not provided to the school until 1935. Prior to the bus, Sunnyside students traveled three miles to Yates on horseback, wagons, or by foot, “so determined were they to complete their high school work.”¹⁶

The original Sunnyside community was

16 Whidby, T.E. 1938. A study of the Sunnyside School, its pupils and the community. Essay.



Patient room in Eliza Johnson Home for Elderly Negroes established by Anna and Clarence Dupree, an African-American couple born into poverty and eventually became investors in education and nonprofit foundations. Sunnyside valued being an independent and self-sufficient community in its early days, values that are carried on today. Photo credit: RGE0047-008, Houston Public Library, HMRC.

an active and organized one. In 1922, community leaders persuaded H.H. Holmes to provide a lot for the community’s first church: Mount Vernon Baptist Church. The Pentecostal Missionary Baptist Church shortly followed. These churches began providing needed social services in Sunnyside, eventually creating and staffing a small home for the elderly.

Sunnyside has been a close-knit community with high levels of social capital. Residents developed many avenues to get involved and organize for community change. Among the first organizations was the Sunnyside Civic Club, organized in 1936 to:

“Keep, maintain, and improve property values within the Sunnyside community; support and promote community activities that are favorable to the



continued growth and prosperity of the Sunnyside Community; and to present a united stand and unified effort in all matters that affect or may affect the Sunnyside Community.”¹⁷

Sunnyside also had two small airports adjacent to the neighborhood. The Linda Sue airport operated in the early 1950s and was located along Holmes Road at the present-day intersection of Interstate 610 and Highway 288. Sky Ranch airport operated from 1946 to 1948 along present-day Highway 288 and Sims Bayou. Sky Ranch was founded by three Tuskegee Airmen who sought to provide black G.I.s and civilians the opportunity to learn about aviation. In 1946, one of the Airmen’s wives, Azalea White, was the first black female to receive

17 Sunnyside Civic Club Fall Gala Newsletter, 2014.



Above: Sky Ranch Airport. Photo credit: www.americancowboymuseum.org. Middle: Sunnyside Civic Club. Photo featured in *Houston Sun*, 1989.

her pilot’s license in Texas. The airport closed prematurely when legislation restricted the use of the G.I. Bill, causing a decline in flight training.¹⁸ Houston’s Hobby Airport was subsequently opened not far from Sunnyside.

Sunnyside Civic Club members remember Mr. Pat Thomas and T. C. Pickett led homeowners in a vote to in 1945 to establish a water district for Sunnyside that would enable them to pay for water and sewer improvements by passing bonds. The first bond was issued in 1951 for \$975,000 and the second bond was issued in 1956 for \$225,000.

T.C. Pickett was also the fire chief of Sunnyside’s volunteer fire department in the 1950s. A women’s booster auxiliary fundraised for supplies, while the city of Houston

18 [Freeman Airfields-Skyranch](#).



Sunnyside volunteer fire department.

provided training and the first fire truck on a lease for \$1 per year. Although the fire station is no longer standing, the Sunnyside Civic Club worked hard to maintain ownership of the land. It is unknown how long the club will retain ownership, as the organization finds it harder each year to keep up with the property taxes on the land.¹⁹

Sunnyside has been home to many firsts for African-Americans. Zeb F. Poindexter was the first African-American to graduate from the University of Texas School of Dentistry in 1956. In 1960, he opened his clinic in Sunnyside in a building designed by John S. Chase, the first African-American student at the University of Texas School of Architecture and the first African-American licensed to practice architecture in Texas.

19 Sunnyside Civic Club Fall Gala Newsletter, 2014.



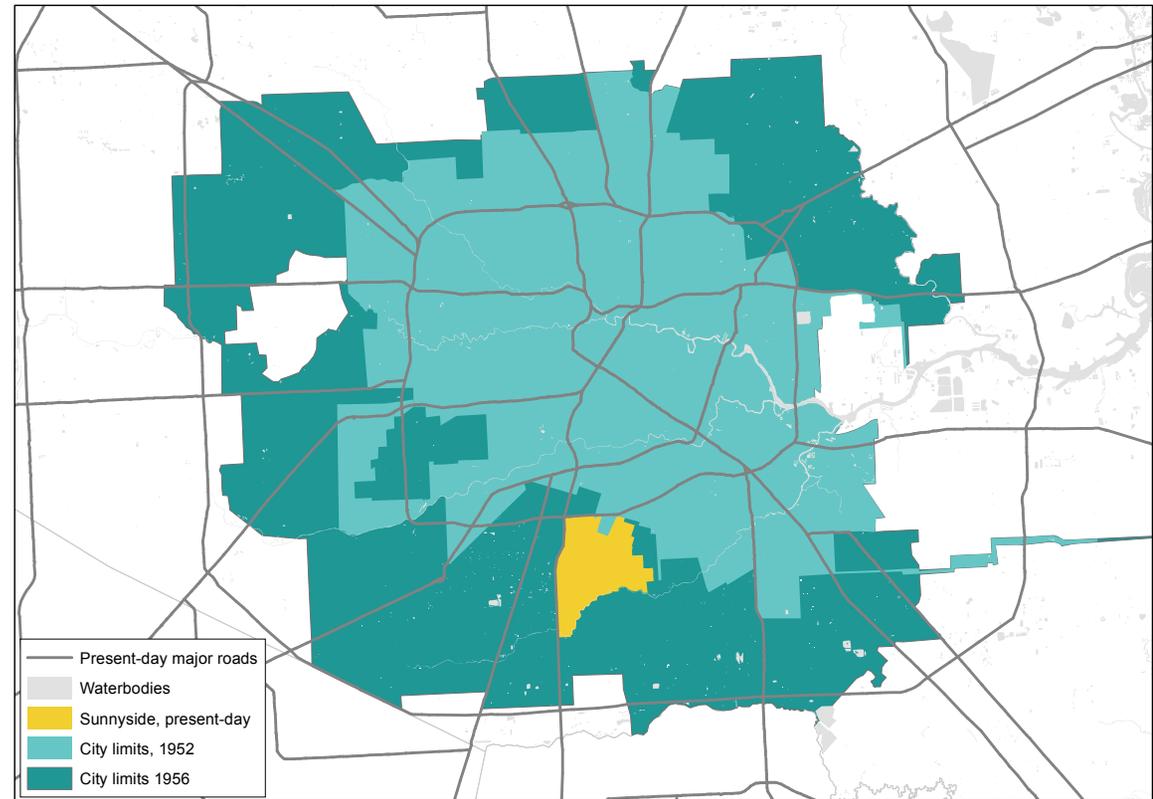
In December 2015, Poindexter Dental received historical marker recognition for their building designed by John S. Chase. Photo from the U.S. National Archives.

CITY SERVICES DELAYED FOLLOWING ANNEXATION

Sunnyside was originally a community of choice for the people who lived there within the harsh limits of Jim Crow segregation. It was a refuge from the physical and social oppression of the city. It was a solid working class community of homeowners. But when the community was annexed in 1956 as part of the largest annexation in the city's history, Sunnyside suffered when the city withheld municipal services, resulting in overall neighborhood decline and disinvestment.

Houston-area cities were racing to secure adjacent land in the 1950s. While smaller cities such as Pearland annexed more land and suburban communities began expanding, Houston performed large annexations, fearing that suburban communities incorporating and ringing in the city of Houston would leave Houston nowhere to grow. Elected officials cited St. Louis as an example of a landlocked city, surrounded by suburbs.²⁰

²⁰ After World War II, cities across the country experienced rapid suburbanization at the expense of the inner city. The City of St. Louis experienced rapid population loss as more residents moved to the suburbs. Most of the population who moved to the suburbs were white, leaving behind a predominately black and poor inner city. St. Louis did not aggressively annex outlying communities in the 1950s, thereby losing much of its tax base as the population declined. Outlying communities incorporated, hemming in St. Louis and preventing the city from conducting future annexations.



The City of Houston's "New Look"

Annexation of 140 square miles (light blue) added to Houston's area in 1956 (dark blue)

The annexation initially came with the promise of improved public infrastructure, including paved roads, a safe drinking water system, sanitary sewer, drainage, fire and police protection, etc. These services were badly needed in newly annexed areas such as Sunnyside due to the unregulated nature of new development outside of Houston's city limits that did not require subdivision developers to provide basic infrastructure for

sewer, water, stormwater, roads, sidewalks and streetlights.²¹ These promised improvements by the city were slow to materialize, however,

²¹ In *Free Enterprise City*, Joe Feagin notes that, among other infrastructure-related issues, "...the 400-plus [Municipal Utility Districts] in the Houston area have created major service liabilities for the city. When the MUD areas are annexed, the city sometimes has faced substantial expenditures to provide adequate utilities to replace the developers' poorly-built or poorly-maintained facilities."

when they were provided at all.

Initially, the delay for providing city services was due to a lawsuit from a group of white property owners elsewhere in the city who objected to being annexed, seeking to void the city's annexation and forbid the city from paying water district bonds with property taxes.²² Many subdivisions, like those in Sunnyside, had created water districts and passed bonds to provide water and sewer service prior to being annexed. Upon annexation, Houston was to assume repayment of the bonds passed by these communities as the city's own debt. At least some of the water district bonds had obligations that exceeded their taxable value, implying that the city would lose money servicing the debt with revenue from the newly annexed communities.²³ The city then had to assume maintenance of acquired sewer and water treatment plants and their associated infrastructure. This process was put on hold while the annexation was challenged in court.

22 "Suit attacks annexation." 1956. *Houston Chronicle*. Sixteen landowners in the Almeda-Genoa and Mykawa Road area filed the lawsuit arguing the City of Houston violated its own charter in the annexation process. In 1960, the Almeda-Genoa/Mykawa area was 99.5 percent white. The west side of Mykawa Road was 47 percent black (U.S. Census 1960).

23 "Welch Seeks Deletion of 6 Annexation Areas." 1956. *Houston Chronicle*.

The lawsuit lasted over a year. In that time, residents were double-taxed. That is, Sunnyside residents paid city taxes while also paying water district taxes while their water services were waiting to be bought by the city.²⁴ Sunnyside residents organized to protest extended delays in the improvement of the water system and the double taxation resulting from paying a private water supply corporation at the same time they were forced to pay city taxes.

In addition, water district rates were typically twice the rate of the same services in the city. These higher rates left residents feeling that they were not getting the full benefits of being annexed by the city. It took over a decade for every water district to be bought by the City, meaning some areas were paying higher rates than others elsewhere in the city limits for up to a decade after annexation.

24 "Annexed areas to pay city, district taxes." 1957, *Houston Chronicle*.

SUNNYSIDE BECOMES CITY'S DUMPING GROUND



View of downtown Houston from the Holmes Road dump, 1972. Photo by Blair Pittman via U.S. National Archives.

While the city was slow to bring promised improvements, annexation brought harmful things to Sunnyside. Shortly following annexation, two city garbage dumps were placed or expanded in Sunnyside. Placing garbage facilities in minority neighborhoods was common practice for the city of Houston from the late 1920's to the mid-1970's. All five large incinerators in the city's history were placed in minority neighborhoods (four in African-American neighborhoods and one in

a Hispanic neighborhood).²⁵ All five municipal landfills from 1920 to 1970 were located in African-American neighborhoods. Minority neighborhoods with former landfill sites often experience more illegal dumping from small private haulers and others who wanted to avoid garbage fees at designated disposal facilities.

The 300-acre Holmes Road landfill began operation in 1937. A long-time resident

²⁵ Bullard, R. D. 1987. *Invisible Houston: The black experience in boom and bust*.

recalls the first roads paved in Sunnyside by the city upon annexation were those leading to the Holmes Road city dump just south of the first subdivision in Sunnyside.²⁶ An incinerator was added to the dump in 1967 with an expectation to burn up to 800 tons of garbage per day.²⁷

The landfill and incinerator had a profoundly adverse impact on the community. An 11 year old boy drowned in an unfenced, water-filled hole at the dump, sparking protests by Sunnyside residents who wanted the dump and incinerator shut down.²⁸ Residents also noted the neighborhood suffered from "flies, roaches, rats and smells" due to the site. Sunnyside's long-time residents recall the stigma attached to going to school while being from the neighborhood with the dump, as Holmes Road landfill was the only operating landfill inside the city limits at that time.^{29,30} Pastors in Sunnyside led protests after they witnessed other communities successfully shutting down compost sites

²⁶ Jones, R. Oral history interview conducted Nov. 12, 2015.

²⁷ "Leavell to Build Dump Foundation." 1965. *Houston Chronicle*.

²⁸ "Sunnyside Residents Picket Dump." 1967. *Houston Chronicle*.

²⁹ Jones, R. Oral history interview conducted Nov. 12, 2015.

³⁰ Walsh, E. "Garbage disposal continues to be major headache." Nov. 30, 1969. *Houston Chronicle*.

elsewhere in the city.

In response to protests, Mayor Louie Welch sent a letter to all 5,000 households in Sunnyside promising that once a new incinerator was in operation elsewhere in the city, the Holmes Road incinerator would be closed and only non-combustible material such as bottles and metal would be disposed of at the site. He also promised to build a badly needed playground and park on a portion of the landfill.³¹ When nothing was done, the neighborhood continued to remind the mayor of his promise years later.

The City cited issues with the Holmes Road incinerator rarely performing at capacity to justify opening another landfill in Sunnyside: the Reed Road landfill. However, a long-term resident remembers Holmes Road landfill being often at maximum capacity, so there was no other choice but to open a second landfill. The city's justification for placing the second landfill less than a mile from the first is still unknown.

The 78-acre Reed Road landfill was opened in 1964 as a temporary landfill. Thomas C. Reed, the original landowner, was given an option to repurchase the land in five years at the original price. In 1969, the dump was expanded by 38 acres and the rights to

31 "Park creation OK'd by council." April 17, 1968. *Houston Chronicle*.

repurchase were bought by the City, thereby solidifying its permanence.³²

After years of protests and arguments with city councilmen, the Holmes Road incinerator closed in 1971. The landfill closed to municipal waste in 1970, but continued to accept soil and demolition debris through 1977.³³

The Reed Road landfill closed in 1970, but left mounds of controversy behind. The former landowners of the Reed Road landfill, argued that the City left the landfill in inadequate condition, with mountains of improperly covered trash when the land was supposed to be graded and capped for future use. Smoldering underground fires lasted for months at the Reed Road landfill after its closing due to 20 feet of trash covering two gas wells on the site.³⁴

In the early 2000s, the city of Houston began the process to convert the former Holmes Road Landfill into a solar farm and park without involving the surrounding Sunnyside community. However, in response to a request for proposals, a developer pointed

32 "Reed Rd. dump is expanded at \$194,408 cost." Nov. 26, 1969. *Houston Chronicle*.

33 [Bellfort Site \(Former Sunnyside Landfill\)](#). Brownfields Conference 2015.

34 "Efforts under way to extinguish smoldering garbage dump fire." Apr. 27, 1971. *Houston Chronicle*.

out a more cost effective location for the solar farm and the city accepted. The lower cost at the alternative site was attributed to the additional cost of appropriately grading and capping the former landfill for future use, since it is currently only properly capped to be undeveloped. There is extensive evidence to show that the city placed the uneven cap when it closed the landfill in the 1970s.³⁵ City officials have stated they are still interested in working with the community to redevelop the site in a way that is "economically feasible" to the city.³⁶

35 Tutt, B. 1971. "Dump Owners: City Broke Promise." *Houston Chronicle*.

36 [Holmes Road Landfill: A US EPA Brownfields Sustainability Pilot](#).

THE STRUGGLE TO HOLD GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABLE

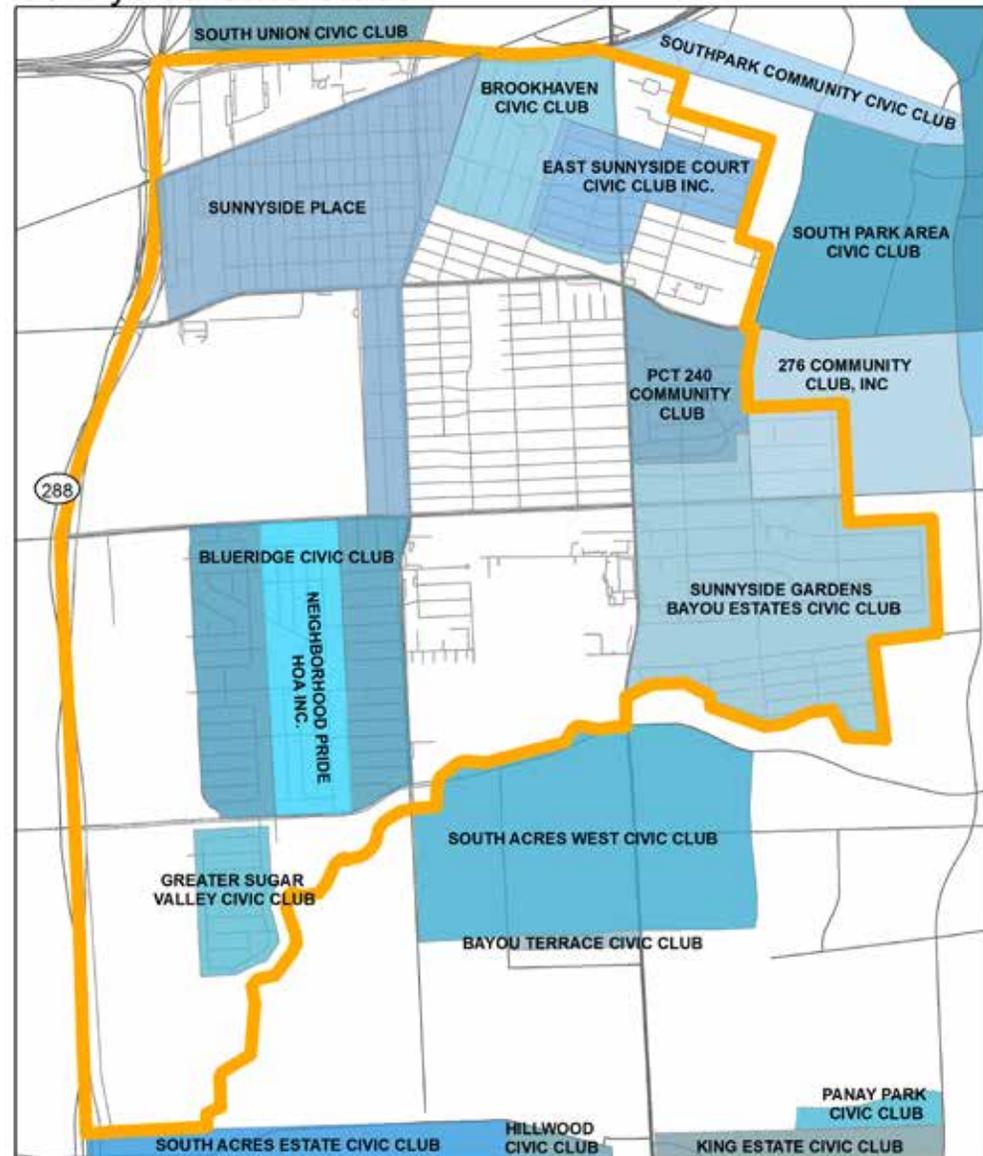
Sunnyside's many civic clubs grew out of need to secure basic city services and facilities. Low income, minority residents needed a collective voice to press for conditions to improve.

Civic clubs take the place of homeowners associations in communities like Sunnyside. However, while homeowners associations have powers to ensure that all residents conform to certain standards and the means to enforce those standards, civic clubs lack any ability to enforce property standards or to prevent undesirable land uses that are incompatible with residential land uses. This is a particular problem in Houston where there is no zoning to control land use.

Sunnyside civic clubs are recognized as stakeholders and voices of their community by the City of Houston. Civic clubs recognize that a community has more leverage on municipal issues as a group than one person. However, even organizing at a neighborhood level can leave neighborhoods like Sunnyside at a disadvantage at a city scale. Civic clubs in more affluent communities have access to greater resources and professional skills, with members often lending their services in architecture, law and engineering to better argue their case to the city.³⁷

³⁷ Much of this section comes from an oral history interview of Jones, R. conducted Nov. 12, 2015. Jones is a former Sunnyside Civic Club president.

Sunnyside Civic Clubs*



Source: City of Houston, last updated May 2013.

*The City of Houston recognizes that this data is incomplete and considers this an ongoing project. Please supply us with the name and boundaries of your civic club if you do not see it on this map.

While lacking enforcement powers, civic clubs have often felt a responsibility to speak on behalf of residents for community improvements. Civic clubs organize and empower people to tackle tough issues such as city service allocation, crime, and drug use. Civic clubs work as a “political liaison” between the community and the local government, often working with mayors and councilmembers to get vacant lots cut, trash picked up, and streets patched or paved.³⁸

While civic clubs serve as the collective voice for the concerns of Sunnyside residents, they also remain frustrated that their voices and civic involvement often do not pressure policymakers to prioritize community issues. Additionally, if civic clubs are seen as the only way to organize collectively in neighborhoods, then some residents may be left out, since some Sunnyside subdivisions are not represented by a civic club.

Civic Club Accomplishments

Civic clubs and other neighborhood organizations often find themselves in a place of power when it comes to new development and capital improvements. The Sunnyside Super Neighborhood, a city-created coalition of civic clubs, provides the city with an Action Plan of capital improvement project requests every two years that is then considered by the

³⁸ Anderson, K.L. Ca. 1990. “Civic club plays active role in area.” *Houston Defender*.



city for inclusion in the Capital Improvement Plan. However, this process has its limitations. Super neighborhoods can only make a limited number of requests and cannot request extensive projects.

The Southeast Coalition of Civic Clubs often holds public meetings for developers seeking community approval for a project. Recently, they assisted in the denial of a permit for a new concrete crushing facility near Sunnyside Park by leveraging partnerships with U.S. Rep. Al Green and the Texas Southern University

legal department.³⁹

Civic clubs have also reminded public officials of their promises. In the 1980s, civic clubs urged city elected officials to provide them with services they were entitled to, such as fix potholes, collect trash, and fix prevalent water and sewer breaks. This community pressure resulted in the city passing a \$4 million bond project to correct the issues.⁴⁰

³⁹ Oral history interview of Jones, R. conducted Nov. 12, 2015.

⁴⁰ Sunnyside Civic Club Fall Gala Newsletter, 2014.

CONCENTRATING POVERTY IN SUNNYSIDE

Unlike most majority white neighborhoods in the city, Sunnyside lacks deed restrictions to protect its homeowners from incompatible land uses. Given the city of Houston's lack of zoning, this leaves Sunnyside vulnerable to any type of development that any property owner chooses to bring into the neighborhood. Therefore, there was little the neighborhood could do when the city targeted Sunnyside as a primary area for the construction of low income, government-subsidized rental apartments.

Conventional market considerations do not operate in the case of project-based subsidized housing. Thus, the over-concentration of these apartments occurred. The large scale construction of this housing by both the public housing authority and by private developers using government funds quickly changed the character of the Sunnyside community from one of single-family homeownership for working-class families into an area of concentrated poverty and racial segregation for Houston's poorest residents who relied on Section 8, public housing and subsidized housing to keep a roof over their heads.

Initially, the residents of Sunnyside were supportive of new affordable rental housing in their neighborhood. However, as white communities effectively prevented any subsidized government housing from being



built within their neighborhoods, Sunnyside increasingly became the primary area to construct this type of housing. In 1967, Sunnyside residents organized protests against slumlords who rented substandard rental housing while taking advantage of government subsidies.⁴¹

⁴¹ "In the Sunnyside neighborhood, a poor area south of downtown, H-HCEEO community organizers found that residents had recently formed the Sunnyside Housing Committee through which they were attempting to put pressure on the Houston city council to prevent slumlords from building inadequate and unsafe housing in their neighborhood. Members

began showing up at city council meetings in October to demand a change in the city's building code and an end to code regulations that allowed unscrupulous residential builders to erect high-density, low quality housing, which had a tendency of turning older neighborhoods into 'instant slums.' ...With the help of the organizers, Sunnyside Housing Committee members launched a protest campaign against the real estate developers who were beginning to build slum housing in the area. In November 1966 approximately fifty people marched in front of the proposed building sites carrying signs that read 'Don't Move In' and 'I Wouldn't Let My Dog Live in These Shacks.'" From Phelps, W.G. 2014. *A people's war on poverty: Urban politics and grassroots activists in Houston*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Yet these protests went unheeded by city hall and did not stop the continued concentration of subsidized rental housing in the neighborhood. Increases in concentrated poverty brought about by the many new subsidized apartment projects led to problems of crime and deteriorating quality of public facilities including public schools. The perception of Sunnyside among others in the city transitioned from a general positive one to a perception that Sunnyside was a neighborhood beginning to take on characteristics of an urban ghetto.

Most recently, the city of Houston passed changes to the land development code that forces increased density on neighborhoods like Sunnyside, which the neighborhood fears will bring the same slum conditions to Sunnyside that it faced in the 1960s. The changes allow for development density to increase in Sunnyside from 8 single family dwelling units per acre (the former “suburban” standard) to 27 single family dwelling units per acre, which was formerly an “urban” standard. If communities want to prevent this from applying to them, communities must apply for minimum lot size protection and fifty-five percent of the neighborhood must support the application. Since the ordinance only applies to neighborhoods who do not already have deed restrictions stating a minimum lot size, neighborhoods like Sunnyside are especially vulnerable.



“Residents March in Protest: Sunnyside Fights ‘Instant Slums,’” Houston Post, November 8, 1966. Photo credit: RG D 0006N.11-07-66Fr.18a, Houston Public Library, HMRC.

Many residents see this ordinance as a direct attack on their vulnerable neighborhood by city government, and fear increased density might worsen existing crime and infrastructure issues.

Today, Sunnyside residents understand that the city of Houston, through its policies and actions, is largely responsible for the most intractable problems the community faces. Having annexed the community, the city failed to provide an adequate level of

the promised public services and used this community as a dumping ground for the things that wealthier neighborhoods in the city, particularly white neighborhoods, would not accept – in particular landfills and concentrations of families below the poverty level forced into the neighborhood by siting decisions for government subsidized housing.