



Crossing the Bridge

Lessons Learned from Hillcrest Relocation

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Editor's note: This is the second of a two-part series. "Under the Bridge: Relocating a Corpus Christi Neighborhood" was published in the January 2020 *TG*.

Relocating hundreds of families to new neighborhoods can be a massive undertaking. However, much can be learned from the aftermath of such a project, as those involved in a Corpus Christi neighborhood relocation project recently found out.

The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) is building a new, 538-foot-tall Harbor Bridge there because of concerns over the current bridge's safety and maintenance costs. A Title VI civil rights complaint was filed against the Federal Highway Administration in 2015 based on the siting of the new bridge, which is near Hillcrest, a neighborhood that for decades had filed class action lawsuits because of harmful health effects from nearby heavy industry.

Initiated by the Title VI complaint, the Voluntary Acquisition and Relocation Program provided participating

The Takeaway

Feedback from participants in a recent Corpus Christi neighborhood relocation program yielded keen insights on how such a program could successfully be carried out in other cities.

homeowners and renters of residential property financial compensation and mobility counseling to relocate. Participating homeowners who elected to remain in the neighborhood also were eligible for financial compensation.

Unsurprisingly, perceptions of the program's success are mixed. Some people regard the program as a win for all parties. Others feel slighted, even overlooked. Hopefully, the insights drawn from this landmark program will provide planners, policymakers, and other practitioners ways to improve future relocation programs. Opinions expressed by each entity do not reflect all opinions held by those involved in or affected by the program.

Public Entity Involvement

According to both the Corpus Christi Planning Department and the Port Authority, no plans have been laid yet for the redevelopment of Hillcrest. (The Port Authority owns properties purchased through the program.) As of Sept. 9, 2019, the Port owned 258 residential properties, more than half of residential parcels in the neighborhood.

Port CEO Sean Strawbridge stated that the agreement reached through the Title VI complaint specifically stipulates that properties acquired by the Port cannot be used by either the Port or other parties for residential purposes. The city's 2035 plan indicates the properties will be rezoned as light industrial, which could include warehouses.

TxDOT officials expressed satisfaction with the program and applauded the work of mobility consulting firm Del Richardson & Associates (DRA). TxDOT is currently involved in the construction of the new Harbor Bridge.

TxDOT officials announced in October 2019 that the \$1 billion bridge replacement project is two years behind schedule, moving the target completion date to 2022 or early 2023. By that time, homeowners choosing to relocate through the program will have already left Hillcrest.

Hillcrest Residents' Options

The Port hired DRA to assist residents, businesses, and churches with the program. Since the initiation of the program in May 2016, DRA has completed 258 relocations—126 homeowners and 132 tenants (figures are as of Sept. 9, 2019; Hillcrest contains 467 parcels—approximately half occupied by homeowners and half by renters). The firm generally cast a positive light on the program, highlighting the relocation of residents to more affluent neighborhoods and better-quality homes.

DRA conceded that not all residents were eligible to participate in the program. Clouded titles, property tax liens, and family disputes have been problematic. However, DRA has worked with homeowners affected by these issues to reach a satisfactory outcome.

Homeowners electing to remain in Hillcrest could either sell their home to the Port and retain a life estate, the value of which equals the appraised value of the property minus the value of the life estate, or sell a restrictive covenant and purchase option on the home to the Port for at least \$7,500. Neither option allows homeowners to accrue any wealth-building benefits, but both allow them to remain in their homes for their lifetime.

DRA said homeowners expressing interest in the program were educated about all options but encouraged to choose relocation as the “best” option. The Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Act (URA), passed in 1970, stipulates households displaced by federally funded projects must be relocated to a “comparable replacement dwelling” that is “decent, safe, and sanitary.”

Criticisms of Program

In October 2019, Real Estate Center researchers visited with Hillcrest residents and Pastor Adam Carrington of Brooks AME Worship Center, a church in northeast Hillcrest. The discussion yielded a variety of concerns about the program for both homeowners who chose to remain and those who chose to relocate. Community members voiced collective criticism about the program's effects on the future of Hillcrest and homeownership for both sets of homeowners.

Significant criticism centered around both former and current Hillcrest residents' identity with and relationship to their present communities. Community members said both groups have struggled in the wake of the program. Those who remained were angry over their perceived upheaval of Hillcrest, particularly the loss of a sense of community. Homeowners who chose to relocate generally purchased homes in more affluent neighborhoods, enhancing their wealth-building opportunities and access to resources and amenities. Unfortunately, some felt excluded or unwelcome in their new neighborhoods.

Community members voiced concern over the additional costs of homeownership incurred by homeowners electing to relocate. Since Hillcrest homes are generally of substandard quality, homeowners who relocated purchased, on average, homes two to three times greater in value to comply with URA. Purchasing a home of higher quality and value should increase their wealth-building opportunity, possibly making it the optimal financial option. However, higher-priced homes have higher insurance costs, taxes, and utilities, which may create issues for the homeowners.

DRA maintains only a few homeowners in the program had this problem. The firm also stated that financial counseling was available to homeowners who elected to relocate to educate them beforehand about the additional costs of homeownership.

Homeowners who elected to remain in Hillcrest expressed concern over the future of the parcels vacated by residents who relocated. After the physical structures are

razed, the neighborhood will be dotted with a checkerboard of vacant and occupied properties. This physically separates the remaining residents from each other as well as from the remaining businesses and churches. It also poses challenges to the provision of public services—such as water, sewage, and infrastructure—to the remaining residents.

Carrington and some of the remaining Hillcrest residents expressed concerns regarding the impact of the program on the community. “The program lacked the ability to make persons who volunteered to relocate whole,” said Carrington. “While, at the moment, several appear to be adjusting to their newer houses, they are not adjusting to missing their long-time neighbors of—in some cases—more than 50 years. Meanwhile, those staying in Hillcrest are fighting for basic city services that a full community would normally receive.”

A number of Hillcrest homeowners believed a more equitable outcome for the overall community could have been achieved if more time and resources had been devoted initially to the program’s design. Several Hillcrest homeowners had hoped some funding would be spent on neighborhood revitalization, preserving the geographic history of the neighborhood. Others would have preferred relocating the entire neighborhood to retain the original community ties.

Finally, DRA essentially served as a liaison between the Port and Hillcrest residents. “Since DRA works for the Port, the relationship between Hillcrest residents and DRA is not entirely neutral,” said Carrington. “A third party, such as social workers, should have acted as a liaison between DRA and Hillcrest residents.”

How Much Time is Sufficient?

Residents who remained in Hillcrest strongly felt not enough time and resources were spent educating homeowners about their options through the Voluntary Acquisition and Relocation Program.

The Title VI complaint was filed in February 2015, an agreement was reached in December 2015, and the Voluntary Acquisition and Relocation Program was initiated Jan. 1, 2016. Although residents essentially had three and a half years to decide about the program (May 7, 2019, was the cut-off date), some community members still argued that insufficient time was spent designing the program and ensuring all voices had been heard before the program’s structure was finalized.

While the program was designed and initiated quickly, DRA asserts attempts were made to provide residents sufficient time to decide whether they wanted to participate and become educated about the relocation process. DRA even extended its initial completion date for the program, providing homeowners who chose to relocate more time to search for a home.

Takeaways for Future Programs

Perceptions of the relocation project’s outcomes varied widely. Public entities and the mobility counseling firm involved in the program generally agreed the program had beneficial outcomes for homeowners electing to participate. Alternatively, the Hillcrest community cast doubt over several components of the program. Unanimity from all parties in such a project is probably too much to expect.

Several takeaways for planners, policymakers, and other practitioners considering similar programs emerged.

- Allow ample time for community members to express their desires for the program and its outcomes.
- Recruit a neutral third-party that acts as a liaison on behalf of the community to ensure the most equitable outcomes.
- Consider the additional costs of homeownership that could be borne by the residents who chose to relocate.

The contrast in perceptions highlights two opposing goals in this situation: the environmental health of residents versus the preservation of the community. The program was structured to offer homeowners the opportunity to relocate from a neighborhood already burdened by significant environmental concerns and depressed property values. However, some residents placed more importance on the preservation of the community, leaving the design of the program at odds with their hopes for the Hillcrest community.

“Relocations are almost never a community’s first choice,” said Kelly Haragan, clinical professor and environmental clinic director at the University of Texas School of Law. “Only once the pollution, health impacts, flooding, or disinvestment has become unbearable do people voluntarily uproot their lives. With the impacts of climate change and the ongoing enormous expansion of the U.S. petrochemical infrastructure, more and more communities will be pushed to the point of considering relocations, and we need to learn how to do them better.”

No program will ever meet all goals perfectly, but understanding perceptions from multiple angles offers planners, policymakers, and other practitioners the opportunity to improve such a program for future applications. ➡

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