

The basis on many of our local climate woes — the city's metroplex vision

By Fernando Centeno, For the Express-News

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The most glaring missing piece from the city of San Antonio's proposed Climate Action and Adaptation Plan directly impacts the three pillars that define sustainability: economic, environmental and social factors.

Namely, there is no discussion or consideration of replacing the city's long-standing "urban planning" model, which defines success in business terms rather than in socioeconomic terms.

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This model focuses and invests heavily on a built environment — an "economic growth" agenda — with the objective of becoming a metroplex.

It is with pride that city leadership announces that San Antonio is "one of the fastest growing cities in the nation," a place where "demand shows no sign of slowing."

But we now have a runaway-train situation as a result, and changing course to address real, critical needs of the community will take courage, dedication and political will, which are currently missing.

Untold tens of millions in public subsidies over many years has assured this manufactured urbanization scheme, which has included an aggressive annexation plan. Instead of promoting and sustaining a natural rate of urbanization — in which the supply side keeps up with the demand side of the equation — we have public officials intervening in the marketplace to artificially build out and away from the city core.

This happens because "success" equates to accommodating the commercial real estate industry. After all, we are city "that nurtures entrepreneurship, encourages investment, and funds infrastructure," all mentioned in the plan. Today's SA Tomorrow "vision" captures this construct clearly.

In many ways, this call in the climate plan to put a brake on the city's long-range plan to double its size in 25 years comes too late. Decisions have been made, and more will be made soon, to maintain this heavily subsidized public infrastructure agenda, directly contributing (and contradicting) the purported concern for greenhouse gas emissions.

Is city leadership courageous enough to recognize its direct role in accelerating harmful climate-related impacts and outcomes?

With respect to the plan's pleas for "recognizing history to solve for the future," this requires "an understanding of the historical legacies, structures, and policies that have resulted in and continue to perpetuate racial and economic inequities in San Antonio."

These "set the foundation for San Antonio to become one of the most economically segregated cities in the country."

Yet, I see no course correction, analysis or policy ideas to address this reality at City Hall. In fact, neither the mayor, council members or city manager have addressed this situation head-on. I see no movement to address economic segregation either.

Addressing economic segregation means replacing the city's urban planning model and, in its stead, formulating a sustainable socioeconomic framework in which success is measured by metrics that eliminate our standing as a poor, economically segregated city.

That means raising standards of living and quality-of-life outcomes in real terms. Instead, we will continue to "succeed" in business terms, irreversibly experiencing rising costs of living, gentrification and displacement, and greater harm to seniors, those on limited incomes, young adults, renters, those with special needs and those living in concentrated poverty, which, in our last census count, rose 8 percent.

I constantly see recycled statistics and indicators about our conditions, but I do not see a real interest in discussing, debating and prioritizing how these challenges can best be tackled and in having a real strategic plan to achieve real socioeconomic results.

Where is this competence and expertise?

A segregationist past and attention to a "white population (that) had the lowest concentration of people living in high poverty neighborhoods" suggests a black-white racial agenda, accounting for a historical and current divide.

I note, however, that since 1981, San Antonio replaced its at-large voting system with one having 10 council districts — assuring for greater "equity" representation at City Hall. Since that time, at least five of the 11 council members have been of Hispanic origin. This means that with one additional vote, this "minority" group would have effective control in the formulation of public policies to address these inequities. Yet no discussion takes place to better understand their role in policy outcomes in socioeconomic terms.

If we continue to see structural inequities, where have Hispanics failed in their capacity to seek greater public outcomes?

The answer lies in the fact that Hispanics in elected/appointed office have continued with the old business structure culture, one which favors a strong built environment agenda, and thereby "sustaining" and maintaining the status quo. In short, the city's urban planning model has remained in place, contributing to our widening socioeconomic divide.

There is no consideration or discussion of viable alternative planning concepts or frameworks. We hear and see the illusion of "growth," "progress" and "prosperity," yet we remain a poor city. "Some voices are underrepresented in city processes ... these populations may not see solutions that work for them in city-led responses to climate change," according to the climate plan. But this reality will remain in place unless and until better key stakeholders are invited to the table.

The city assures its long-term vision by having "influential community members, and business and institutional partners," who are well-connected in policy formulation, financing and the city's long-term planning vision.

This component needs greater consideration for truer equity to occur. In the plan's glossary section, "equity" is left out. I would pay attention to what this term means in the context of the discussion above.

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