



# **“Bien Vivir” Historic Westside**

Equitable Neighborhood  
Development Action Plan

*San Antonio, TX*

*Developed in partnership with*



**ESPERANZA**  
PEACE & JUSTICE CENTER

## Mission

*The people of Esperanza dream of a world where everyone has civil rights and economic justice, where the environment is cared for, where cultures are honored and communities are safe. The Esperanza advocates for those wounded by domination and inequality — women, people of color, the lesbians, queer, trans and gay community, the working class and poor. We believe in creating bridges between people by exchanging ideas and educating and empowering each other. We believe it is vital to share our visions of hope... we are esperanza.*

# “Bien Vivir” — Historic Westside

## Equitable Neighborhood Development Action Plan

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# 01 | Introduction

**The Esperanza Peace and Justice Center is a grassroots, community-based arts and cultural organization in San Antonio, Texas, working for social justice and cross-cultural understanding.**

Esperanza has in over 30 years grown into a formidable national leader in combining cultural arts with historic preservation, education and social justice.

As a social justice and community arts organization, the Esperanza has seen the need for a holistic, just and participatory plan for the historic westside of San Antonio, where much of the Esperanza's activity takes place. The neighborhood parameters for this plan are east on Frio/Highway, west on Zarzamora Street, north on Commerce Street and south on Laredo Street.

Over the past 30 years, the Esperanza has worked with strategic areas which provide a framework for equitable neighborhood development. The following strategic areas are important to the development of the Historic Westside:

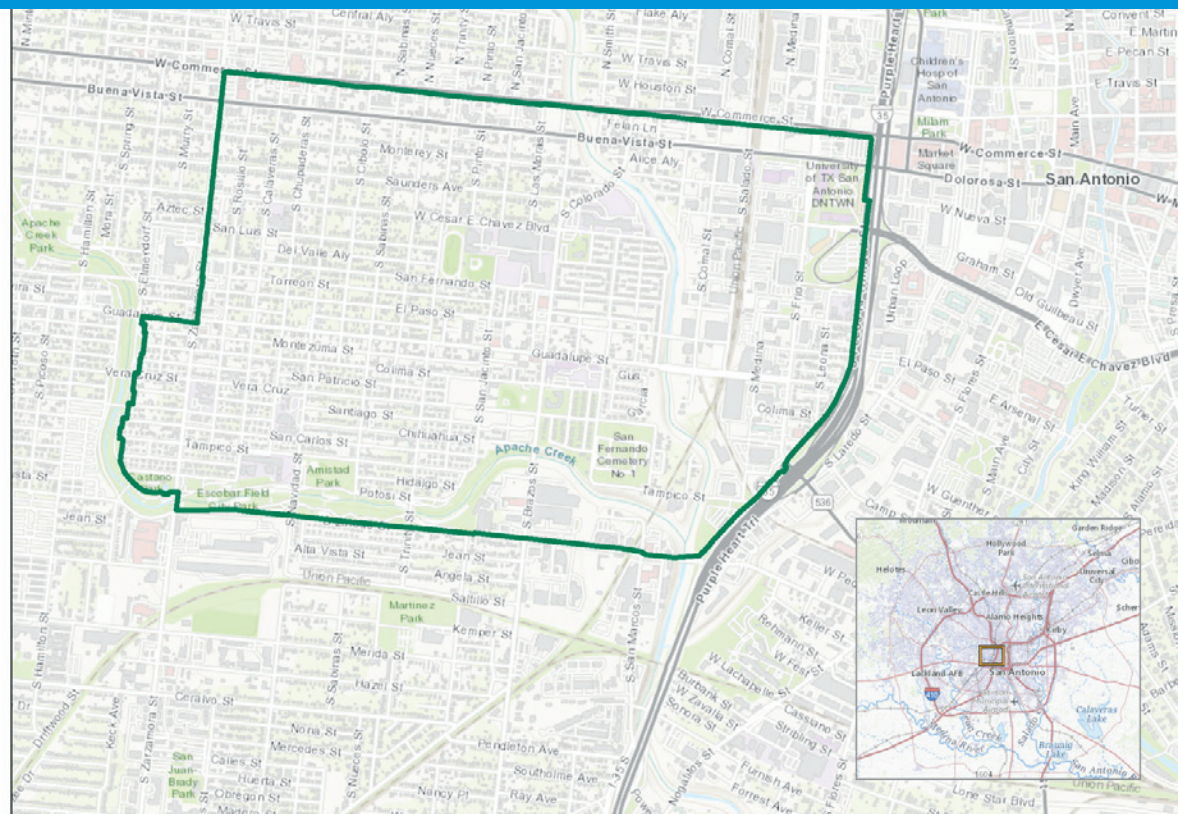
- Holistic Community Development Through Arts and Culture
- Housing/Historic and Cultural Preservation
- Ongoing Grassroots Community Organizing

The term *equitable* points to a planning process and decision-making approach which is equally community-driven and people-centered to counterbalance the perspectives of the commercial interests of powerful developers.

This plan has involved residents and organizations representing the community within the parameters identified above (Historic Westside) during the period July 2020 through March 2021. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, restrictions and lockdown, as well as the freeze of winter 2021 when the city's residents suffered duress from lack of electricity, food and income, the Esperanza completed outreach work physically in the neighborhood and digitally, although not to the optimal extent which is required for the coming years.

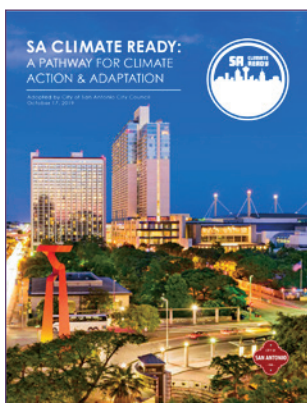
The goals of this plan are to create the grounds for development that inhibit displacement and preserve the historical, cultural uniqueness of the Mexican-American character of the Historic Westside neighborhood, particularly the lives and traditions of residents with low, working-class and fixed incomes.

## Historic Westside Neighborhood Parameters





Globally, these goals coincide with goal 11 of the the UN Sustainable Development Goals, to “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable” (2018).



Locally, the plan is informed by the City of San Antonio’s SA Climate Ready Sustainability Action Plan, Action to Ensure Equity in Adaptation, which is described as “Preventing displacement, prioritizing vulnerable residents, acknowledging and

understanding different perspectives and impacts, and an equitable distribution of resources are all key components of SA Climate Ready” (2020).

The Esperanza’s plan can also be seen as strengthening and supplementing the City of San Antonio’s SA Tomorrow Comprehensive Plan, particularly as it relates to the *Westside Community Plan’s Neighborhood Action Strategies*

as a continuum of phase 4, which “will develop specific projects, programs, and policies to affect change in the Westside area. This phase will also include the development of specific, action-oriented implementation strategies and recommendations for potential funding sources” (2018).

The Esperanza Peace and Justice Center has the experience of deep involvement with community residents, small business and cultural heritage initiatives and institutions of the Historic Westside. This plan targets three umbrella strategies also based upon the most recent needs and visions for their neighborhood from resident stakeholders per 2020 to early 2021.

*“We want a thriving community versus one that is just surviving,”*

*— Resident statement, January 2021.  
Focus group meeting with the Historic  
Westside Residents Association.*



*"...the 'open city,' is where citizens actively hash out their differences and planners experiment with urban forms that make it easier for residents to cope."*

*— Richard Sennett, social analyst, 2018.*

# 02 | “Bien Vivir” —

## A Plan for Imagining 30 Years into the Future for Historic Westside Development

**This plan is to be used as a deepening of the participatory structures** found within the [SA Tomorrow Westside Community Area Plan](#) (2017) and the Westside Equitable Economic Plan organized by Prosper West SA, plans in which the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center has been involved (2021). Many of the principals for a people-centered focus are inspired

by the work of Richard Bedoya’s work on placekeeping and placeknowing (Rao, 2020).).

This plan maintains a realistic, positive and proactive focus for the next 30 years so that residents who so desire may remain living in their homes and neighborhood.

*“Currently, urban policymaking is determined by the drive to accumulate as much capital as possible, and the effect is to destabilize our cities through the displacement of individuals, families and entire communities. But the people who shape communities from the ground up — the urban residents who practice the art of poiesis, or making in the sense of transforming the world — should have the real agency. Acts of imagination ultimately shape the public sphere, where we make meaning together, in shared space. Imagination produces a commons that is continually generated and mutated through our actions.”*

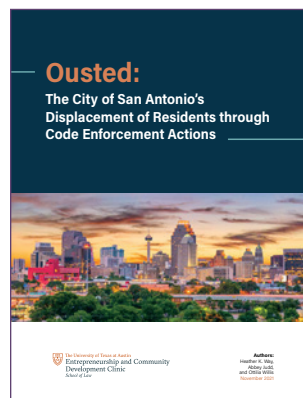
— Roberto Bedoya, *Spatial Justice: Rasquachification, Race and the City*, 2014.



## A Need for Transformative Practice

San Antonio has been called the “Mexican American cultural capital of the US,” and the Westside, birthplace of many of our most beloved musicians, artists and social justice leaders and the site of many of our most important historical events, is its heart. Yet the Westside is now in danger of losing its historic and cultural identity, with the neighborhood impoverished by years of systemic racism and most recently diminished by a wave of gentrification.

Even more urgently, numerous Westside homes are being demolished every year, condemned by a code compliance enforcement system that allows an anonymous complaint to trigger a process leading to demolition of the home and sale of the land. Whatever merit this system may have in theory, it now serves as a convenient tool for land speculators to force the demolition and sale of Westside homes.



Many Westside residents have become alarmed by these threats to our community and have organized to do whatever we can to prevent displacement of our working-class families and neighbors, many of whom live in humble yet beloved homes built

by generations past. We have come to understand the value of our unique community culture, and we are determined to prevent its loss.

This plan challenges concepts and thinking about expertise and practice, and we, the Esperanza, together with the planners, politicians, activists, artists and residents, must ask ourselves new questions regarding what drives local planning. No matter which incentives exist, the goal must be to ensure that residents who wish to can remain living in the historic Westside in 30 years to come.



## Context

The interrelationships of technology, speed, work life, wages, sustainable resources and spiritual life create a map of city life which can be difficult to decipher. The development approaches here propose transformative attitudes and actions towards a future historic Westside that is sustainable, just and resilient. Solutions lie in future conversations.


We need practice in doing community educational initiatives, like workshops, pláticas, community focus groups and conversations through dialogue to gather the current human stories as a means to learn how to face the contradictions of our times and to imagine

alternative development planning. Needed skills lie within the arts, intercultural dialogue and facilitative leadership. The Esperanza is highly qualified, with over 30 years of using these skills resulting in community pride and local cultural-historic awareness.

People-centered planning represents values which transform traditional policy and politics. Politics is not just about voting and campaigns, politics also manifests as we listen, imagine and network in consensus-structured, relational collaborations to create not only fair housing, produce affordable energy and healthy food, but also to **value community life and spirit**, practicing participatory methods as we reshape places and procedures for decision-making.

*Most policy people are technocrats. They make an argument around data, but what do you do to try to make an argument around experiences? It's a harder argument because you maybe don't have the data points, but you have a bunch of mothers crying out at city hall, and that has a power and that can impact policy.*

— Bedoya (Rao, 2020)



The time is now to reorder how local development is planned. The following key principals are what we ask for in relational collaborations:

- **The principal of nurturing an expansive mind set** which values resident place knowledge and the goal of antidisplacement.
- **Facilitative leadership** as a way to share and gather current knowledge through participatory methodology. New understandings of expertise — academic, citizen, administrative, and expertise from youth are needed.
- **Intercultural communication** is needed for community-based collaborations which provide the reordering of the way local development is planned. The different language used by politicians, bureaucrats, activists, artists and residents, civil institutions and institutions of faith will require new communication

skills. Structures for decision-making and common communication must be flexible and according to local needs.

- Cultivation of communication through **creative arts**. A principal of all-way communication is needed to integrate the necessary information needed by all stakeholders. Dialogue and expression through the arts needs to speak for those who have knowledge that is difficult to transmit through formal bureaucratic rhetoric.
- Systematic use of **reflective evaluations**. A living plan must renew itself as contexts change. The process still needs to measure itself and results. Setting benchmarks and milestones and the use of reflective evaluations throughout the process must include all involved community residents, businesses and civil institutions as well as the formal and political decision-makers.

# 03 | Strategic Areas, Goals and Actions

The Esperanza Peace and Justice Center has three main strategic areas for this equitable plan:

1. Holistic Westside development
2. Community-driven programs and neighborhood development
3. Ongoing grassroots community cultural organizing


As mentioned, the goals of this plan are to create the grounds for development that inhibit displacement and preserve the historical, cultural uniqueness of the Mexican-American character of the Historic Westside neighborhood, particularly the lives and traditions of residents with low, working-class and fixed-incomes.

## Strategic area 1: Holistic Westside Development

### Actions:

1. **Establish the Esperanza Community Land Trust (ECLT).** The Esperanza Community Land Trust emerges from many years of organizing, self-education and conversation among numerous Westside community members and organizations, including the Historic Westside Residents' Association, Westside Preservation Alliance, Texas Housers, Mi Barrio No Se Vende Coalition and the Alazan residents' group. We have witnessed the tragedies of displaced families and the soul-wrenching scars left by demolished homes and vacant lots.





In May 2021, the Esperanza established the Esperanza Community Land Trust (ECLT) for the Historic Westside. This is a model pilot initiative for a citizen-driven effort for affordable housing. The preservation of existing housing stock has been widely recognized as critical to any metropolitan affordable housing plan. In addition, the community land trust structure has been shown to be an effective means of securing permanent and deeply affordable housing.

The mission of the Esperanza Community Land Trust is to preserve and repair existing homes in the Westside and to ensure that a significant number of these homes are occupied by long-term, low-income Westside owners or renters.

## **2. Establish a Coordinating Committee.**

**3. Renovate 3 Westside homes** designated for the exclusive use as low-income rental housing managed by the Esperanza and select tenants according to eligibility criteria defined by the Coordinating Committee.

**4. Incorporate a Demolition Prevention component with a Demolition Emergency Fund.** The ECLT will provide funding for needed repairs, enabling the building to be preserved and the owners to remain in their homes.

**5. Work with governmental officials** to coordinate our efforts to preserve existing Westside housing stock.

**6. After two years, incorporate the ECLT** as an independent Texas nonprofit organization Trust, which will acquire, renovate and rent single or duplex family homes in the Historic Westside.



*The former Ruben's Ice House is being restored and converted into the Museo del Westside. Photo by Ben Olivo | Heron*

## Strategic Area 2: Community-Driven Programs and Neighborhood Development

### Actions:

#### 1. Hire a coordinator for local development

**initiatives** and determine the position's mandate, with the responsibility of coordinating the long-term process of local development.

#### 2. Provide the necessary information of the ECLT

to the Esperanza board and other local organizations, such that this work is adopted as integral to the Esperanza's work for local development.


**3. Create the structures for the process** and provide information of external development that has an impact on the ECLT.

**4. Follow up** formal requirements and legal aspects in relevant areas for the ECLT, when necessary.

#### 5. Hold regular information exchange meetings

with the coordinating committee no less than twice a year to:

- Maintain the reporting data for the Esperanza leadership and Coordinating Committee.
- Coordinate resident and housing organizing.
- Secure supportive measures so the Housing Organizer and other community outreach initiatives continue to work among residents, housing authorities and housing networks to



*A neighborhood that still  
“feels like home” for residents  
of all ages.*

integrate the expertise of all groups needed for the local development of the area.

- Maintain a holistic assessment of activity (external) that will impact the local development plan actions and report these to the Coordinating Committee.

## Strategic Area 3: Ongoing Grassroots Community Cultural Organizing

A people-centered community development and design should promote community identity through arts and culture and strengthen the social and cultural fabric of the neighborhood.

### Actions:

- 1. Recover stories.** The Esperanza Peace and Justice Center will continue to recover stories, histories and cultural traditions, which enable the community to envision alternative futures, futures in which artistic, cultural and health practices are valued and help preserve tangible and intangible cultural values and practices.
- 2. Further develop the Museo del Westside.**
- 3. Facilitate citizen planning,** both in-person and virtual training, and a series of workshops for residents of the Historic Westside to examine the history of the Westside, community organizing, urban planning and design policies and practices, and the principles of cultural organizing and public participation.
- 4. Facilitate the participation of children, youth and elders** in creating change in their community and built environment.
- 5. Maintain and develop Casa de Cuentos (House of Stories),** a historic house that serves as a cultural heritage center where the oral history of Westside residents is shared, and Mujer Artes, a clay cooperative where low-income Latina women learn and use their skills to tell personal stories through clay.
- 6. Present ideas from outreach work and focus groups** for the development of free, community use of parks to local city administrators and elected officials.

# 04 | Al Fin:

## Perspectives for Development that Feels Like Home

In short, in the words of social analyst Richard Sennett, there is a need for planning which allows the relationships of “how cities are built and how people live in them” to communicate with each other (<http://www.richardsennett.com/>).

The Esperanza Peace and Justice Center has the expertise and experience to show how holistic development needs the voices of the residents and the willingness of policy makers to create neighborhoods that feel like home.

According to the surveys, interviews and conversations in 2020-2021, people of the neighborhood tell stories that, despite troubles and tensions, are mostly stories of neighbors helping neighbors, small businesses thriving and “getting along,” and children and elders who experience living in peace.

Residents also mention the need for public transportation, cooperation with authorities, opportunities for small businesses to thrive, and for public resources and practices to keep the physical and social environment beautiful, secure and healthy.

*Here are some answers to a question posed to over 300 residents in November and December 2020: “**What do you love about the Westside?**”*

*These responses give a cross-section of statements indicating a sense of neighborliness and peace.*





We are a peaceful neighborhood, good neighbors and access to medical places.



The people and community. They take care of each other.



Close to transportation.



Community and living next to transportation.



Everybody is united and try to help each other.



We want more cleanup and Co-Compliance of codes by businesses.



Everything is convenient, would like to see more community engagement (garden, etc.).



Here we are hardworking people, folks keep themselves going.




"This is the heart of San Antonio."



It is more community than being afraid.



Very family oriented, everything, love taking walks in the neighborhood.



*Time is overdue to ask the question, “Who benefits and who loses in the way we develop and re-develop the neighborhoods of the city in which the low-income residents call home?”*

— Susan Morales Guerra, social justice activist

In creating this plan, the Esperanza has gathered some of the complex stories which must be understood and respected to make a people-centered and community-driven plan. Through this, along with the Esperanza Community Land Trust for affordable housing and structured work done by the systematic coordination for holistic analysis and action, there is the possibility to achieve the goals of an equitable development that prevents displacement and honors historic cultural values of this Mexican-American neighborhood.

The work to end displacement of the residents of the Historic Westside begins now. The strategic areas and goals for this plan name only three strategic areas which

involve many details and complex actions, many of which are yet to come. **This is a living plan.**

The long-term process is contingent upon external changes and politics, decisions which will impact the outcomes of this plan. Therefore, the systematic review and evaluation of actions and steps to be taken will be necessary to measure progress and timelines of this plan.

Most importantly, what this plan brings to the table is the importance of listening to what residents have to say and then incorporating their views and timelines into holistic planning to maintain the Historic Westside as a revered place and beloved home.

## Strategic Area 1: Holistic Westside Development

Actions	Current & Ongoing	1 -3 Years	3 -5 Years	5+ Years
Establish the Esperanza Community Land Trust (ECLT)	X			
Establish a Coordinating Committee				
The incorporation of a Demolition Prevention Emergency Fund				
Renovate 3 Westside homes designated for low-income rental housing				
Incorporate the ECLT as a nonprofit organization to acquire, renovate and rent single or duplex family homes in the Historic Westside.				

## Strategic Area 2: Community-Driven Programs and Neighborhood Development

Actions	Current & Ongoing	1 -3 Years	3 -5 Years	5+ Years
Hire a coordinator for local development initiatives				
Hold regular information exchange meetings with the Coordinating Committee no less than twice a year				
Maintain reporting data for the Esperanza leadership and Coordinating Committee.				
Secure supportive measures for the Housing Organizer and continue to work among residents, housing authorities and housing networks				
Coordinate residents and housing organizers with development issues for affordable housing and avoiding displacement				
Maintain a holistic assessment of developer activity (external) that will impact the local development action plans and report these to the Coordinating Committee.				

## Strategic Area 3: Ongoing Grassroots Community Cultural Organizing

Actions	Current & Ongoing	1 -3 Years	3 -5 Years	5+ Years
The Esperanza Peace and Justice Center will continue to recover stories, histories, and cultural traditions, which enable the community to envision alternative futures and help preserve tangible and intangible cultural values and practices for people-centered development planning	X			
Further develop the Museo del Westside				
Facilitate citizen planning, both in-person and virtual training, and workshops for residents of the Historic Westside				
Facilitate the participation of children, youth and elders in creating change in their community and built environment.				
Maintain and develop Casa de Cuentos (House of Stories) and Mujer Artes, a clay cooperative where low-income Latina women learn and use their skills to tell personal stories through clay.				
Present ideas from outreach work and focus groups for the development of free community use of parks to local city officials.				

*This Equitable Neighborhood Action Plan is supported by:*

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