



MY KIND OF TOWN



Houston!

Where Both Challenges And Prospects Are Larger-than-Life

If Texans embrace the view that bigger is better, then Houston is larger-than-life. The Houston Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area (CMSA) covers 8,778 square miles, an area slightly smaller than Massachusetts but larger than New Jersey. Houston is the fourth most populous city in the nation (trailing only New York, Los Angeles and Chicago), and the largest in the southern United States and Texas, with 4.8 million people in the metro area.

Houston puts on the largest rodeo in the world, is home to international pop star Beyonce Knowles (lead singer of Destiny's Child), and is the final resting places of Howard Hughes. These are just a few of the highlights that illustrate Houston's eclectic and unreserved character.

In 1960, nearly 75 percent of the population in Harris County (of which Houston is the county seat) was Anglo. Today, no ethnic group has a majority but the largest is Hispanic. More than 90 languages are spoken in Houston.

Of the 25 largest urban areas in the United States, Houston is ranked 8th

in terms of job growth. About 49 percent of the regional economy is related to the energy industry. Houston also is home to the Texas Medical Center, which represents a local economic impact of \$10 billion dollars.

City leaders tout Houston's housing as some of the most affordable in the 10 most populated metropolitan areas. Its median household income is \$36,616, and has been rising steadily. In a quarterly housing affordability report, the Real Estate Center at Texas A&M University estimated that 60 percent of Houston households could afford a median-priced home in the first quarter of 2003. The median price of single-family homes reached \$129,900 in October 2003. Even so, Houston's median still is considerably lower than the national median, which reached \$172,300 in September 2003, according to the National Association of Realtors.

Houston also has a history of land speculation and a strong tradition of property owner's rights, that reach back to its earliest roots. In 1836, two brothers from New York, Augustus

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and John Allen, navigated north from Galveston Bay to Buffalo Bayou to capitalize on seaport development. From this beginning, Houston was born. To this day, it remains one of the largest unzoned cities in the country.

The NeighborWorks® Role

In this setting of unfettered commercial development and little or no land use regulation, three NeighborWorks® organizations attempt to deal with community development issues such as gentrification and blighted properties, and to combat the negative effects of low education levels and low incomes in concentrated areas of the city.

Each network organization represents a distinct target area in the city, and each takes a unique approach to neighborhood revitalization.

Avenue Community Development Corporation started with a historic preservation mission in Houston's Sixth Ward, and grew to expand its boundaries and inner-city development challenges, which it has taken a "green" approach to.

Fifth Ward Community Revitalization Corporation's target area was once described by *Texas Monthly Magazine* as "Texas' toughest, proudest, baddest ghetto." Fifth Ward is determined to transform the area into a thriving "neighborhood of choice," and is employing innovative strategies that incorporate technology as a significant tool for changing the minds and hearts of the community.

Tejano Center for Community Concern's service areas are the East End and the Denver Harbor/Port Houston district, all predominately low-income Hispanic neighborhoods, with low literacy levels and high rates of crime, gang violence, and drugs. Tejano Center pursues a holistic approach to community development by working to meet the health, social, educational, and housing needs of the area.

The challenges faced by the three NeighborWorks® organizations are daunting, but prospects for success seem attainable. Trends indicate more people want to live in the central urban area, and a special initiative, called "Blueprint Houston," is charged with planning for a growing population and improving the quality of life for residents of the city. ■

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