

It's Not What You Think - Challenge assumptions about southern Dallas

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Many northern residents would be content to live out their lives without ever venturing into the half of Dallas south of the Trinity and I-30. The widespread assumption is that crime there is rampant, gangs rule the streets and crack houses abound.

Last week's presentation of the 2007 Wholeness Index challenges much of what we think is true about our city and its north-south imbalance. The image conveyed by the J. McDonald Williams Institute is far from rosy. We've got some major problems to overcome - problems left largely neglected for decades and allowed to fester. But we've also got many reasons for hope.

The Williams Institute compiled the index using statistics in 12 quality-of-life areas, such as school performance, crime rates and income distribution. Neighborhoods receive scores from 1 to 100 in each area. The lower the score, the wider the disparity.

This year's index shows that the north-south gap still exists but is narrowing in some key areas. Schools in parts of the south are catching up in student retention rates, SAT scores and graduation rates. More middle-class homes are becoming available. Voters are becoming more active. On the negative side, life expectancy is lower for southern residents.

The index also busts a major myth: that South Dallas has the worst crime. In fact, northwest Dallas is the area with the highest block crime rate - 33 percent higher than the rest of the city.

If anything, the index dispels the idea that a disparate conglomeration of neighborhoods, comprising roughly half the area of Dallas, somehow deserves to be lumped together as the "southern sector." The negative image this label conjures suggests it's time to steer toward a new way of thinking about a region that's anything but uniform racially, economically and geographically.

Anyone looking out on Dallas from the limestone cliffs of Ledbetter Hills - where sprawling, upper-income homes are being constructed alongside affordable cottages in the new Capella Park subdivision - knows there's a huge difference between it and Fair Park. Anyone riding horses on the green-pastured dude ranch just south of the University of North Texas-Dallas campus would never think of lumping such a serene atmosphere together with that of, say, the check-cashing and pawn shops along Jefferson Boulevard.

We also need to bust the myth that the north-south gap is being adequately addressed by our city's political and business leaders. It's been far too comfortable for them to look the other way, and that's about to change.

To help Dallas decision-makers stay focused over the weeks and months ahead, our editorial board will be identifying key areas requiring attention, such as drugs, race relations, employment, education, retail development, housing and even broken sidewalks and stray dogs. We'll look at the neighborhoods making progress and ask how they're doing it. We'll examine the experiences of other cities to see how they've tackled similar problems.

Anyone who wants to see Dallas become more vibrant and prosperous should understand that it won't happen when half the city shuns the other half. The time has come to close the gap.

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