

Mechanics of CHANGE - Tackling decades of imbalances in southern - Dallas may be harder during a recession - but it's not impossible, says Tod Robberson

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A look at the landscape two years into our project, BRIDGING DALLAS' NORTH-SOUTH GAP

Conditions have changed considerably since The Dallas Morning News introduced its campaign in late 2007 to bridge the gap between northern and southern Dallas. The economy took a nose dive. The Trinity River project stalled over engineering questions. Mayor Tom Leppert worked to win approval for a convention center hotel.

Despite the focus often being elsewhere, signs of progress are evident that could be leveraged into much larger victories in southern Dallas. But that will require a renewed sense of mission by the city's political and business leadership and vastly improved partnerships among those with influence in southern Dallas communities.

Late last year, The News commissioned a detailed study of southern Dallas by the Institute for Urban Policy Research at the University of Texas at Dallas. We hope this information, to which today's Points section is devoted, will help City Council members, DISD trustees, business and religious leaders, interested citizens - and our own newspaper - find concrete strategies to bridge the north-south gap.

For the 51 percent of Dallas residents who live north of Interstate 30 and the Trinity River, the substandard conditions that most of the southern half has endured for decades may not be top of mind. But it's in everyone's interest to see southern Dallas move closer to the north's level of prosperity.

Companies that come looking for a new home in Dallas don't just look at the economically healthy and vibrant north. The disparities are a business turn-off. When southern residents' incomes and property values remain depressed, a higher tax burden shifts to those in the north.

Some might argue that bad economic conditions and budget shortfalls make it impossible to address these problems right now. Yes, officials have an obligation to balance the budget. That doesn't, however, let them off the hook for finding fiscally responsible ways to remedy generations-old developmental imbalances.

Finding solutions will be harder when there's less money, but that's not an excuse to keep putting off southern Dallas' problems until better times roll around. It just means being more innovative and persistent in inching toward the goal of making our city whole.

The Institute for Urban Policy Research culled scores of federal, state and local databases for statistics quantifying the extent of the north-south disparity. Additionally, it sent researchers into five specific neighborhoods to assess such criteria as housing conditions, street maintenance, the presence of street lamps and obvious code violations. The teams even noted where paint was peeling and stray dogs were present.

The five neighborhoods - in parts of West Dallas, Oak Cliff, Red Bird, Pleasant Grove and South Dallas-Fair Park - were chosen based on their potential for progress that could radiate outward. The database and some of the interactive "windshield maps" are available online at dallasnews.com/opinion/northsouth.

It is important to note that the statistics related to our five bases do not necessarily represent all of southern Dallas. They are, at best, a snapshot of the conditions likely to be faced by residents of areas with similar demographic and income characteristics. Many of the problems reflected on the windshield maps may have been fixed by now; others may have arisen.

Help residents

help themselves

Dallas-area politicians have widely varying approaches about the best way to fix the problems in southern Dallas. Some favor a comprehensive approach that would address multiple fronts simultaneously: roads, schools, jobs, investment, code enforcement and crime, to name a few. Their energy and drive is commendable, but they cannot succeed without broader support. These problems developed over decades, and fixing them will require years of unwavering effort.

Other politicians have remained largely silent, as if these problems somehow are best left to fix themselves. Rest assured, they will not.

Nor will elected officials find solutions by leading solely from the City Council chamber or school board auditorium. Just as it requires extensive behind-the-scenes efforts by top leaders to bulldoze a hot-sheet motel or open a new supermarket, leadership also means inspiring people to start helping themselves.

For example, our statistics show that large percentages of parents and children still don't understand how their behavior affects progress toward a solution. Far too many southern Dallas generations have grown up receiving the wrong message.

In the West Dallas Gateway base, for example, 11 percent of births in 2008 were to teen mothers, and 68 percent were to unmarried mothers. Fifty-five percent of births were to mothers who dropped out of high school. This is where the cycle begins. Children in many such homes are being raised by mothers who are kids themselves, with minimal parenting skills and limited income-generating potential. Statistics indicate that children who grow up in that atmosphere are more likely than other kids to repeat the example of their parents.

What other wrong messages are our children getting? In the Pleasant Grove Crossroads base, more than half of residents 25 and older have no high school diploma. Nearly a third didn't get past ninth grade. The neighborhood's per capita income in 2008 was \$9,929 - less than half the citywide average. And yet 90 percent of Pleasant Grove households have at least one car. More than half own two to five cars.

Could parents in this Pleasant Grove neighborhood be sending their kids the message that "success" means earning enough to buy cars, rather than finishing high school and maybe going on to college? For those adults, perhaps, success isn't defined by climbing the professional ladder. It might be simply getting a job - any job - and earning enough to buy the material necessities they lacked growing up.

Maybe it's just coincidence, but until May, the two worst-performing Dallas high schools were both in the Pleasant Grove area - H. Grady Spruce and W.W. Samuell. Dropout rates at those schools remain high, despite the school district's best efforts to retain students. If the message students are getting from their parents doesn't match the message they're getting from teachers - that education should be the first priority - then little is likely to change.

If this theory is correct, it should apply to other areas with similar demographics.

The Pleasant Grove and West Dallas bases have similar rates of low-earning Hispanics. In West Dallas, where per capita income was \$10,357 in 2008, 43 percent of households own two to five vehicles. Materially, West Dallas residents seem to be coping well, but they face severe educational deficits. The area's high school - Pinkston - joins Samuell and Spruce among DISD's lowest achievers.

If high schools aren't performing in these areas, it means a new generation of low-skilled young adults is preparing to enter the job market, helping perpetuate the cycle that holds most of southern Dallas down.

In all three of those struggling schools, DISD pumped massive amounts of time and energy this year into programs to raise students' scores on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills and to get parents more involved in helping their children improve academically. Did it bust the budget? Not at all, because the effort relied heavily on volunteerism and self-help.

Can DISD do better? It must, because eight of the city's 12 most-troubled high schools are in southern Dallas, and our statistics show that they have been consistently short-changed in terms of average class sizes and teacher-experience levels. Although Pinkston and Spruce improved significantly on their TAKS scores, they remained on the academically unacceptable list, partly because of dropout rates. The solution will call for dozens of strategies - from curriculum improvements to teacher training. But DISD can't do it alone. Parents play an integral role in keeping their children in school.

The killer commute

Is it realistic, though, to demand greater parental involvement, considering the other pressures southern Dallas parents face? These workers, on average, must commute greater distances than those in northern Dallas to jobs that pay far less. Citywide, about one out of seven workers spends 45 minutes or more commuting to work. But about one out of four Red Bird Renewed and Pleasant Grove Crossroads workers faces a daily, one-way commute of 45 to 90 minutes.

Think about it: Ninety minutes one-way means a round-trip commute of three hours a day. Anyone spending that much time going to and from work is bound to have far less time to devote to proper parenting or cooking healthy food. As a result, federal statistics show, health problems such as obesity are much higher among populations with low incomes. Obesity, in particular, drops when leisure time increases and healthy food choices are more available. A healthier southern Dallas is definitely in the financial interests of northern Dallas taxpayers.

Not only do southern Dallas residents have to travel longer distances to work, they also earn less than average. Much less. The average adjusted gross income of a Red Bird base wage-earner, for example, is only one-third of the citywide average.

Meanwhile, Dallas-area employers are spending more to locate their businesses in the north, despite the availability of cheap, expanses of land in the south. If, at the same time, southern Dallas workers are spending more money and commuting time to reach low-paying jobs in the expensive north, wouldn't everyone benefit if more of those employers were in southern Dallas?

Of course, many businesses refuse to consider southern Dallas because of its image as a high-crime area full of shacks and garbage.

Interestingly, the crime rate is falling across southern Dallas and is lower, per capita, than in northern Dallas. According to official police statistics, two of the highest-crime areas of Dallas are in ZIP codes 75231 and 75243, which are within a mile of the city's most high-profile mall, NorthPark Center. Yet business investment thrives there.

When it comes to investing in southern Dallas, "the biggest drawback, to be real truthful, is the perception," says Leppert, the mayor. "There's a lot of things that have happened, and that certainly doesn't mean there's not more to do. ... But we still deal, unfortunately, with the perception" that southern Dallas is a bad place for business investment.

Let's be careful not to raise expectations beyond reason; southern Dallas workers wouldn't necessarily make more money if more businesses relocated there. But workers certainly would spend less on car and mass-transit expenses getting to their jobs, and they might at least have the option of spending more time at home because of the shorter commute. That represents a net increase in disposable income and quality of life. It also means more time to spend parenting.

Where to start

The research by the Institute for Urban Policy Research confirms that the two priorities for bridging the north-south gap must be jobs and education. Both are tricky problems to attack during a recession, but it can be done within existing budgetary constraints. Here are places to start:

1. The mayor's office

Leppert has raised the city's profile and attacked problems with admirable dedication. Let's take it to the next level: a concerted, national or international campaign to bring big employers to southern Dallas, building on what the mayor has already done during trips to Mexico and China. As Leppert has pointed out, there already are three excellent southern Dallas sites for transport, big-box and warehousing companies to set up shop, at the International Inland Port of Dallas, Pinnacle Park and Mountain Creek Business Park.

Over the next 15 months, DART rail's Green Line will establish a new potential business corridor between Pleasant Grove and South Dallas-Fair Park. It's imperative that developers see the possibility of locating affordable big-box stores like Kmart or Target on available land along U.S. Highway 175, close to rail stops in Pleasant Grove.

Our statistics show that the heavily car-dependent residents of Pleasant Grove may need some persuasion to use DART rail but that South Dallas residents will depend on it. So the rail lines can help create an inter-neighborhood commercial and employment synergy that will benefit both communities and better suit their transit-oriented developmental needs.

"I would love for the national economy to be better," Leppert responded when questioned on this issue.

Fair point. But this is exactly the time when major corporations are searching for bargains. And as the mayor himself says, there's no better deal than southern Dallas for the availability of cheap land and vast human resources aided by city-funded training centers.

Now is the time to market it vigorously. Corporate America is taking a fresh look at production models and seeing new merit in domestic markets vs. outsourced production in developing countries. Consider these comments in June by General Electric's chief executive officer, Jeffrey Immelt: "Inside the company we're doing real decision-making about: have we outsourced too much capability in [foreign] areas? And if so, what should we bring back, and where should we put it?"

General Electric is looking at labor costs and locations to see where it can get the best deal for its money. "In the places where you have relatively high labor costs, they've got to be more productive" if they have any hope of competing on a global basis, he says.

Clearly, southern Dallas has the marketable mix of low labor costs and competitively priced land close to major shipping routes. It's time to start presenting these as selling points for our city. Our mayor has the corporate credibility to present this case authoritatively, and he can do it without busting the budget.

2. Council and school representatives

City Council members and school board trustees can take their roles to the next level, too - particularly in regard to organizing and team-building efforts in their districts. Not to mention making certain that constituents receive accurate and constructive information about their neighborhoods and schools.

Remember that parents and grandparents who were raised without proper educations and with minimal parenting skills are role models for new generations. This risks the perpetuation of a minority-dominated underclass in southern Dallas that is unable to qualify for good jobs and too poor to move elsewhere. While there are active parents at Sunset High and numerous elementary schools, many areas are full of residents too busy struggling to survive to be involved with neighborhood associations and PTAs.

Waiting for people to get organized is no way to lead. It's not enough to attend the opening of a library and portray yourself as a "hands-on" council member or trustee. Leadership is organizing and attending community meetings, rallying neighborhoods and helping people take responsibility for their lives and their children's futures.

People just need help knowing how to get started. Once they're introduced to the basics of community leadership - and properly inspired

by good examples - southern Dallas will have the tools for the high quality of neighborhood organization that has helped so many northern Dallas communities thrive.

"People need to understand that progress is being made," the mayor says. "Just don't give up."

3. The business community

In this economy, every dollar has to count. The mix of costs for labor, land and transportation should be the dominant factors guiding business decisions on where to locate offices, stores, warehouses and factories. We don't expect corporate decision-makers to base their decisions on altruistic notions of what's best for southern Dallas or righting historic wrongs, but rather what's best for business. And when they do the calculations, they will discover what employers such as FedEx, Union-Pacific Railroad, the Allen Group and Advanced H2O already have: Southern Dallas is where the numbers work best.

The University of North Texas Center for Economic Development and Research came to the same conclusion in a report three years ago: "Southern Dallas is ripe for new and expanded business investment.

Importantly, companies locating or expanding in the southern sector have access to a large and readily available pool of talented individuals with a broad range of skills. What's more, because many workers drive through southern Dallas on their way to and from work in other areas, many of them will respond to job opportunities closer to home."

4. Religious and nonprofit groups

Our research suggests that these groups are wise to follow the adage, "Give a man a fish, feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, feed him for a lifetime." Volunteers working each day to help the needy in southern Dallas might consider a new approach, relying less on giving and more on building a sense of self-reliance. For example, more can be done to raise awareness of the cross-generational damage caused by teen pregnancy and to teach proper parenting skills.

These groups also can help by organizing community meetings and pressuring trustees and City Council members to attend. The idea is to deliver the inspirational messages of hope and responsibility that southern Dallas residents need to hear - again and again.

In addition, these groups could assist more with the team-building needed to raise the level of neighborhood activism, whether that be in reporting code violations or creating crime watch groups.

The message should be consistent with the goal: If you want better retail or better jobs closer to home, you must take steps to improve the attractiveness of your neighborhoods. If parents want a better life for their children, they will have to become better parents first.

These are four difficult - and perhaps lofty - goals. Some elected officials, business leaders and volunteer groups might be tempted to dismiss them as impossible.

Our challenge to them is, first, study the statistics in this section and on our Web site. Are existing efforts making the kinds of progress they should be? Are they enough? Finally, what better ideas are out there? We want to hear them.

One thing is clear: Accepting the status quo, as reflected in these statistics, is accepting perpetual imbalance and underperformance. Plans that provide little more than cosmetic or piecemeal fixes are not the answer. This is the call to action - not more excuses.

Dallas Morning News editorial writer Tod Robberson wrote this on behalf of the editorial board. His e-mail address is trobberson@dallasnews.com.

• Caption: MAP(S): (1-2. TOM SETZER/Staff Artist)1. A look at commuting patterns 1-62. Southern Dallas CHART(S): 1. Behind the research (2. TROY OXFORD/Staff Artist) Underperforming high schools3. Citywide ILLUSTRATION(S): (MICHAEL HOGUE/Staff illustration) Landscape

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