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Major Eason , '23

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# AT THE FOOTHILLS OF THE HIGHEST HILL IN THE SWAMP: A POLICY BRIEF FOR EAST LITTLE YORK



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Ma 2023

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### **Introduction: A Community Under Attack**

For almost half a century, the predominantly Black East Little York community in Houston, Texas has been besieged by forces of environmental violence. The area became majority Black in the late 1970s and with that transition, the City of Houston permitted private industries to dump in the community. Over time, a smattering of LULUs (Locally Undesirable Land Uses) arose including concrete batch plants, truck yards, and illegal dumping sites. These pollutants harm resident health and the area's economic fortunes, as home valuation and commercial development lag behind the rest of the city.

These facility placements are not accidental. Centuries of racial oppression have led to the social and economic devaluation of Black people and communities. Therefore, spaces such as East Little York are targeted for facilities like landfills. Once the trash begins to come in, the area itself is viewed as a dump (Bullard, 2008). This belief extends to a larger scale to what Sociologist David Pellow (2007) calls a "racist and classist culture and ideology within northern communities and institutions that view toxic dumping on poor communities of color as perfectly acceptable".

Environmental justice (equity in environmental quality and infrastructure) for communities such as East Little York is a form of reparations that can entice communal healing. It is also necessary. We are reaching a period of intense global environmental destruction, and marginalized communities hold the most environmental damage. Therefore, we cannot "go green" unless there is a concerted effort across locales to greatly reduce pollution in BIPOC communities.

To move forward with the solutions that entice environmental equity, there must be an understanding of the ways environmental racism occurs and the manner in which residents resist

this injustice in the area. Additionally, there must be knowledge of the urban planning patterns and cultural practices of the area. Through this mission, I develop the “The East Little York Redevelopment Project”, which is birthed out of both resident resistance and knowledge of the area’s development patterns.

## Policy Overview

First and foremost, the policy calls for the ending of all industrial permitting in East Little York, the placement of air monitors near the site of large pollutants, and a crackdown on illegal dumping in the region. This is focused on community development efforts to foster economic growth. I look towards projects that aid community beautification (litter cleans up, home improvement, etc.), transportation infrastructure (road improvement, expanded bus service, sidewalk expansion, tree planting), and grants to locally owned (must be owned by an East Little York resident) businesses and nonprofits. Lastly, the plan would fund training in solar installation through the local Houston Community College branch. Paired with solar installation training, money should be invested into subsidizing solarization projects in the community. East Little York residents will receive priority for jobs and training within each field. Within this policy is also the identification of community partners that could help guide the transition to a more sustainable state.

This scheme should primarily serve to do two things. The first is to slow, and hopefully lead to long-term prevention of environmental harm in East Little York by forcing firms to address environmental racism in their placement practices. The other is to leverage this process of de-pollution towards invigorating communal and economic growth in the area. In this brief, I will outline the history of the environmental justice movement and scholarship on both a macro and local level, outline the current and historic environmental and demographic makeup of East Little York, the forces that led to the current situation, and the key issues the community faces. After this background work, I will expand on the proposed policy.

## **What is Environmental Justice?**

### **Activism**

The toxification of East Little York did not arise in a vacuum. Environmental racism – the disproportionate siting of pollution in communities of color – dominates the national landscape. White, wealthy communities are almost always juxtaposed with marginalized communities which bear the brunt of pollutants from waste and industrial processing. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, some Black communities fought back against this unjust siting of toxic facilities, the Northwood Manor protest this study draws from being one of them. In Chicago, residents of the Altgeld Gardens housing development were encircled by a myriad of industrial plants and poorly-capped landfills. The “Mother of the Environmental Justice Movement,” Hazel Johnson, head of the local community organization, PCR (People for Community Recovery) spent the remainder of her life warding off the siting of additional toxic facilities and fighting for greater environmental clean up from the present facilities. Perhaps the most famous environmental justice protest occurred in Warren County, North Carolina, where 500 members of the predominantly-Black county crowded the roadway, blocking trucks leading to a newly-built PCB landfill. While these actions did not result in drastic immediate change, they showed that Black communities would stand up to environmental injustice and set the stage for future action across the country.

### **Scholarship**

From these protests, scholarship arose which provided both qualitative and quantitative evidence to display the existence of environmental racism and placed the environmental justice movement in a greater context. Robert Bullard conducted a pioneering study in the field, which

found that Houston landfills were disproportionately placed in Black communities (Bullard, 1983). This study was the basis of the Northwood Manor community's case in the previously mentioned *Bean vs. Southwestern Management Company* lawsuit. From the landfill study, Bullard analyzed several other predominantly-Black Southern communities with high levels of pollution, from which he wrote *Dumping in Dixie*, which showed how toxic facilities were sited in Black communities and displayed resident's willingness to fight against said facilities (Bullard, 1990). Later studies support Bullard's work. The importance of race in regard to the distribution of pollution is even more pronounced, as Crowder and Downey (2010) found pollutant levels in Black communities were higher than in White communities when controlling for socioeconomic status and educational attainment. Additionally, polluting facilities move into Black communities, contrary to the notion that Black people knowingly choose to live in polluted neighborhoods (Pastor, et.al 2001).

This disproportionate siting of toxic facilities can be further explained by the critical environmental justice framework, an intersectional analysis that focuses on the state sponsoring of environmental injustice, especially across different levels of power (Pellow 2017). Black communities are therefore not just targeted by private entities with the state as a passive actor, rather the state also perpetuates systems that induce environmental harm. Marginalized communities are treated as dumping grounds for pollutants because the people in these spaces are viewed as disposable (Pellow 2017). This relationship crosses between the local and international levels. Lastly, solutions intersectional-based solutions that account for a multitude of social factors from race to gender to class are also important in these discussions (Taylor, 2014). This policy brief uses this environmental justice-based activism and scholarship to craft a potential solution for East Little York.



## The Counterattack: Case Background

*“You guys have a mountain in Northeast Houston?”*

### Direct Action and Lawsuit

In 1978, Browning-Ferris Industries received a permit to build the Whispering Pines Landfill. Members of the predominantly-Black Northwood Manor community adjacent to the proposed facility believed they would receive a shopping center (Melosi, et.al, 2007). Therefore, when news of the landfill’s siting reached the residents, they were left aghast. Community members were horrified by the health and safety issues a landfill could bring to the area, as shown by a resident who said, “I had an obligation to my children to defend them, not to go through the turmoil of the dump” (Melosi, et.al, 2007). This comment did not just refer to the home lives of the children, as the landfill was built in close proximity to multiple schools with predominantly Black student populations (Bullard, 1990).

In response to this worry about environmental harm, residents of the region affected by the facility, an area that extended through East Little York (a section of Northeast Houston), protested the landfill through local community organizations. These protests were spearheaded by community members active in Houston Civil Rights organizing in the previous decade. This incident culminated in a lawsuit, *Bean vs. Southwestern Management Corporation*, the first environmentally based Civil Rights lawsuit in United States history. In his case study, expert witness and the future “Father of the Environmental Justice Movement” Robert Bullard found that between the 1920s and 1970s, Black neighborhoods held six of the city’s eight municipal incinerators, all five of the city municipal landfills, five of the six state-owned landfills, and five of the six privately owned landfills despite making up only one in four residents of the city (Bullard, 1983). This evidence built the main concept of the case, which was: The city allowed

the siting of the Whispering Pines Landfill to occur in Northwood Manor because the neighborhood was predominantly-Black. Although the community members lost the case, changes occurred because of the resident's protests. City-owned waste trucks were prohibited from dumping at Whispering Pines in 1980 and the Texas Department of Health mandated landfill permit applicants to submit the racial and socioeconomic data of areas near proposed landfill sites (Bullard, 1987). Additionally, the city built the J.T. Trotter Park near Northwood Manor to appease residents. The protests, one of the earliest in the environmental justice movement, displayed the ability of Black communities to mobilize against the unfair placement of toxins in their neighborhood.

### **The Case Today**

Forty years later, environmental harm has only worsened. Communities that receive one toxic facility, such as a landfill, are often subject to even more hazardous facilities, as land is further devalued, regulations are often weaker, and a decrease in public and private investment leads to these pollution sources making up a larger portion of an area's tax base. Furthermore, the perception of environmental justice communities such as East Little York becomes skewed, as the community itself is seen as a site to dump waste because of the facility it houses. (Bullard, 1987). The placement of the landfill invited residents and business owners across the city to illegally dump large waste such as construction material, commercial waste, and even old cars and boats in the community. The city's failure to regulate this dumping has led to the region being littered with debris that is often large and hazardous.

Additionally, multiple other landfills are now sited in the Greater Northeast Houston area. Residents have complained about both Whispering Pines (now Republic Services) and the other landfills in the area producing leachate which leaks into prominent area waterways and

groundwater. In addition to issues around waste, other LULUs (Locally Undesirable Land Uses) are located in the area. These include a myriad of environmental hazards including truck yards, illegal dumps, and freight rail lines. Of most recent concern are concrete batch plants, which often are within primarily residential sections of East Little York and produce sulfur dioxide, which can lead to intense asthma. The environmental racism the area faces will be compounded by the climate crisis, as more intense flooding will affect the Houston area, as seen with Hurricane Harvey. East Little York was one of the most affected regions, as the area's relatively weak flood infrastructure could not hold up, and the toxic chemicals from the area's polluters seeped into the floodwaters. Despite this dire situation, there remains hope. Community groups such as NERHC (Northeast Houston Redevelopment Council), led by Huey German Wilson carry on the tradition of the original Northwood Manor activists by continually standing up for their community.

From this community action, Northeast Houston has seen some positive changes in the past five years. The Department of Justice has launched an investigation into illegal dumping in the area, which has led to the city putting \$17.9 million into the enforcement of illegal dumping (Cheng 2023). While not in East Little York, a biweekly farmer's market serving the greater Northeast Houston area has opened, providing fresh food for residents subject to food apartheid. This community-driven political action has led to calls to action on solutions that clean up East Little York and open the door for economic and social prosperity.

## Methods

To collect data for this policy brief, I analyzed historical mapping and census data about the area to understand the forces which led to LULU placement and collected interview data from local residents and community leaders.

I conducted interviews of community residents through snowball sampling, in which I gain subjects through a non-probability sampling method, where new people are recruited by previous interviewees. This strategy has been the basis of my current study in East Little York. In this space, I have been able to establish two points of entry, one through a community leader who has pointed me in the direction of two interviewees, and another through my basketball trainer, as I indirectly worked to meet two community residents through his network. Snowball sampling is effective because I am not from either space. Therefore, I look to work through existing social networks to familiarize myself with the population and better connect with interview subjects. This strategy also gave me the chance to trace, and then examine, how these networks and organizations in the space contribute to environmental justice solutions.

Overall, I was able to conduct five, hour-long interviews. For the sake of anonymity, I will address each resident with pseudonyms.

## At the Edge of a Cowboy City: Site Outline

*“Houston is just like where I’m from [El Salvador] except the roads are a bit nicer.”*

### Present Day

Northwood Manor, a predominantly-Black neighborhood located in Northeast Houston is about 2-3 miles south of George Bush Intercontinental Airport and is located in what is called “Super Neighborhood 47,” or “East Little York” which also houses the three other predominantly Black subdivisions of Fontaine Place, Scenic Woods, and Riverwood Estates. In 2019, 22,349 people lived in the super neighborhood and it was 68% Black, 31% Latinx, and 1% Non-Hispanic White. The city as a whole is 22% Black, 45% Latinx, and 24% White (“East, 2021). The median household income is about \$38,044 compared to the city’s average of \$52,338. East Little York is therefore much Blacker and somewhat poorer than the rest of the city.

Only 8% of the super neighborhood has a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 33% of the city and the median home value is almost 100,000 less than the city average (77k vs 171k). This low housing value is especially an issue when 84% of the area’s housing occupancy is made up of homeowners. This is additionally an issue because lower housing values point to cheaper land and less economic capital to fight against the environmental hazard, leaving the community more susceptible to polluting entities.

Discrimination in land valuation and environmental disparity is a nationwide issue. Poorer communities of color receive the brunt of environmental burdens, however, the manner in which environmental injustice occurs is dependent on the density, land use practices, policies, and culture of the area. When looking at the super neighborhood’s layout, it is on average, just as dense as the rest of Houston, with 3,236 people per square mile, compared to the city’s average

of 3,443 people per square mile. However, there is a high disparity within this metric, with certain areas of central and West Houston reaching up to 10,000 people per square mile comparatively. This relatively low density when compared to other urban areas is exhibited with its suburban, and in some spaces, exurban layout. Single-family homes sit on decent-sized lot sizes in the area's four key subdivisions (Map in Appendix).

Between these subdivisions, spaces emulate other lower-density areas of Houston as open land also serves as space for extremely low-density uses such as trailer parks and horse and cattle grazing. They also hold car and truck lots, scrap metal sites, landfills, and concrete batch plants. A large number of these toxic facilities has led to the area having the highest rates of infant mortality in the county, which is a large concern for community groups in the area. This concern is backed up by data that shows that air pollution is significantly related to infant mortality rates (Agarwal, et.al, see Appendix).

### **Relation to City Policy**

Houston's land use policy directly relates to this dire situation. Most famously, Houston is the only major American city without zoning. Instead, the city is governed by a patchwork of ordinances and deed restrictions. Neighborhoods of color like East Little York are systemically not as protected as their wealthier, wither counterparts by these measures. Ordinances simply are not as often enforced and there is no stringent zoning code to prevent polluters from placing their waste in the area.

Additionally, economic development in which positive externalities outweigh the negatives has been scarce. The boosting of an area's economy is a strategy to mitigate environmental hazards, as raising land values and the creation of a community reputation that includes clean and white-collar employment deters polluters from operating as they currently do

in the space. Transportation infrastructure, educational improvements, environmental cleanup, the promotion of green jobs, and community-oriented business grants are ways in which the city can aid the area in this sustainable development. However, the City of Houston's budget is constrained because of a revenue cap. As property tax rates rise, the city tax falls, and the amount the city can make cannot be raised by the combined rate of population growth and inflation (or 4.5%, whatever is lower). Therefore, the city often spends less than it needs to on public sector projects, and this especially short changes historically underdeveloped communities of color, leading to further deterioration of East Little York's infrastructure.

### **Historic**

For much of Houston's history, the area that is today East Little York was an unincorporated in-between space between Houston and the oil boomtown turned bedroom community, Humble. This changed in the 1950s with the massive sprawl of Houston. From 1960 to 1980, Houston's metropolitan area population jumped from about 1.2 million people to 2.8 million people ("US Census"). This growth occurred laterally, as sprawling low-density subdivisions followed highways out of the city center. The Eastex Freeway (US-59), constructed throughout the 1950s and 60s, made the 10-mile drive from East Little York to Downtown Houston only 15-20 minutes. Additionally, the expansion of petrochemical plants is about 10-15 minutes south in East Houston. The opening of the Houston Intercontinental Airport in 1969, about 5 miles northwest of East Little York, also opened up greater employment opportunities, as businesses and office space clustered around the airport. These economic factors worked with several other pull factors including the proliferation of air conditioning, greater social tolerance post-Jim Crow, and a continued boom in the oil industry that drew people to Houston. Therefore,

the space that is now East Little York transformed into a bedroom community on the outskirts of the city limit.

Wealthier white communities in these unincorporated communities would readily move away from “inner-ring” (and I put that in quotes because these developments were still very far from the center city) developments to newer ones. Sometimes, people of color would fill in their place. Therefore two main modes of Black suburbanization took place in Houston:

1. Black residents from the inner city populated regions surrounding unincorporated Black communities in greater numbers
2. Predominantly white suburbs transitioned to becoming predominantly Black ones.

East Little York developed in the second manner.

While the census tracts of the region have changed over the years, a similar area is covered (See Appendix). The area was fairly rural, working class, and white until the late 1950s, when it started to transition into a suburban bedroom community. The neighborhood remained predominantly White until some point in the late-1960s when it became a predominantly-Black neighborhood. It is also important to note that by the 1970 census, this section of Harris County was denser than it was in previous years, meaning the census tract lost area, and that is why there is a perceived population drop from 1960 to 1970. However, as more people moved in, the population went back up in 1980. This demographic shift – from White to Black – also came with the increase in environmentally hazardous facilities. This trend can be seen with the aforementioned Whispering Pines Landfill. The Northwood Manor community’s position on the city limits along with a history of oil wells and a sewage treatment plant made it attractive for LULU placement due to its distance from the city center. However, when the area was predominantly White, a proposed landfill was blocked (Melosi, et al). Despite protests, the



landfill was eventually built once the community became predominantly Black. The claim of historic racial bias in the siting of environmental pollutants is further evidenced in the fact that in 1978, when the Whispering Pines landfill was proposed for Northwood Manor, landfills and incinerators in Houston were predominantly in predominantly-Black neighborhoods (Bullard, 1983).

### **The Macro: Major Themes Informing Policy**

Three major themes drive the need for the proposed project. Below I have my three themes that include concepts I will expand upon through them. These themes will inform how I approach my policy solution.

#### **Racial Segregation and Black Suburbanization**

The key structural issue underlying environmental racism is residential segregation. The sectioning off of Black communities allowed for intentional underdevelopment from public and private sector actors. Knowledge about residential segregation stems from early Sociological studies about Black communities, which examined racial inequality between Black and White communities. (Dubois, 1899). Further studies show that the disproportionately high levels of social ills that fall on Black communities, such as poverty and lower educational attainment, are due to the hypersegregation of the country's urban areas (Massey and Denton 1995).

This trend is apparent in the Houston area as well and is instrumental in the historical shaping of East Little York today. Early studies found racial disparities in education, economics, and health outcomes in Houston throughout the middle of the twentieth century, in which he found notable racial differences in birth rate, and economic conditions (Bullock 1943). Black communities are intentionally underdeveloped because of their isolation from white spaces with more resources. This situation was the result of Texas Jim Crow laws which allowed (and often encouraged) white homeowners to add clauses in deed restrictions prohibiting prospective Black buyers from the space.

These trends continue today. When asked why he doesn't like his neighborhood, one East Little York resident replied, "Too much trash, too many potholes." When further pressed on why he thought this was the case he simply replied, "Redlining."

This was a process in which the federal government only granted homeowner loans to White areas and people, thereby locking most Black people out of integrating into more well-resourced communities. Additionally, the bank's redlining of Black communities made it impossible to invest in residential or commercial property in these communities, effectively stalling development and capping the tax base of Houston's Black community (Taylor 2019).

In response to this relative lack of resources, Black residents from spaces such as the Third Ward moved out to suburban areas, looking for better opportunities. East Little York was one of these spaces. Therefore, while subdivisions in East Little York, such as Northwood Manor, are working-class suburban enclaves with high homeownership rates, the area's designation as predominantly Black makes it a target for undesirable facilities. Unfortunately, this expansion of Black communities led to disparities in the resources newer Black communities and newer White communities received. It also led to differences in the environmental quality as Black suburban areas received the expanding number of environmentally hazardous facilities (such as landfills) needed to support this continued growth.

Basically, Black communities are designated as an underclass zone, and intentionally underdeveloped. This devaluation made these spaces prime sites for the dumping of pollutants (Bullard, 2008). Furthermore, a longstanding history of interpersonal racism makes residents wary of moving to predominantly white spaces such as Spring. Resident Marcus F. remarked, "I could have lived on a golf course, but didn't want to run the risk [of day-to-day racism]". While residential segregation pushed Black people to spaces such as East Little York, a lot of residents now want to stay in their community. However, the current environmental risk makes it harder to do so.

### **Deregulated patterns of urban development**

The ways in which environmental racism appears over a landscape is dependent on an area's policies, demography, practices of land development, history, and cultural values. East Little York, for a multitude of reasons, is much different than most other urban sites.

The development of the area fell in lockstep with the development of the rest of Greater Houston. The explosive growth of the area coincided with the proliferation of highway traffic and automobile. This combined with an industrial base in petrochemicals, which requires ample space for development, led to the city growing in a relatively low-density, sprawling manner (Herble 1948).

Additionally, Houston is the only major city in the United States without zoning, which is instrumental in its growth patterns. This creates interesting (to say the least) patterns of development in East Little York, in which undesirable facilities, such as concrete batch plants, are placed in residential communities.

The city is not completely lawless, however. Jeffrey Lowe and Assata Richards (2021) show that a patchwork of deed restrictions, city ordinances, state laws, and homeowners associations ensures that certain spaces cannot be used for unwanted purposes. However, environmental regulation is not equally enforced in communities of color and the lower home values, higher rates of real estate turnover, and lower residential and commercial density stemming from a lack of investment from public and private sector entities, lead to industrial facilities being placed dangerously close to residential areas in marginalized communities. This issue arise even when minority communities were suburbanized in Houston, toxic industries “followed” racially oppressed communities, believing they would face less government and private market pressure (Bullard, 1987).

This lack of zoning, therefore, makes the environmental racism of Houston different than any other city. Since zoning laws cannot prevent polluting industries sited in cheaper, Black neighborhoods, one would think these communities would support zoning laws. However, Black people repeatedly rejected calls for zoning throughout the city's history. Black people, spearheaded by Black elites, were fearful of white elites, working between the city government and powerful private developers, gaining control of their property through zoning laws (Lowe 2021).

Multiple community residents commented on this situation. One community leader stated that she “sees no problem with the lack of zoning laws” and that her father owned land with horses and other livestock. However, another community member lamented that many people want to “treat Houston like the rest of the county” and believed the environmental harm being done to his community couldn't stop until zoning laws were implemented.

This conundrum taps into a large part of what is especially interesting about the City of Houston. Despite the fact that it is an urban environment, ownership of large pieces of land, and most importantly, independence to use one's land is culturally important. Therefore, contrary to what more traditional planners may believe, the auto-centric development and urban planning (or lack thereof) of Houston is not the only reason for its unorganized, sporadic sprawl. A culture of laissez-faire attitudes towards business and land ownership, where people, across races, believe they should be free to use the land of their own accord feeds into the chaos that afflicts the city. However, while these attitudes may appear negative for collective action to combat environmental racism, they can also be the impetus for creative, place-based solutions to the region's racial and environmental inequities.

## **Strategies of resistance**

The most important part of informing this policy is the strategies of resistance from community activists. Resistance to environmental racism can take place in both direct and indirect manners. Directly, community members such as Huey German Wilson protest leaders at councilmembers and Mayor Turner at City Hall. Indirectly, actions such as the creation of farmer's markets and back-to-school drives created centers of collective activity in which people gathered and dispersed resources out of the purview of some community members.

What must be further addressed to strengthen collective action is the balancing of individualism and collective action at the community level. While not directly related to environmental racism, one resident complained about difficulties with another woman's children in the area who constantly used her property. She said, "I can't fight them and raise mine." This tension between individual homes and the greater community is not unique to East Little York. However, these rifts are extenuated when faced with racial inequality, economic uncertainty, and environmental harm.

Yet, these issues stemming from structural inequalities also create ample room for organizing and are key reasons why Black movements have been America's strongest push for social equality. Through the leveraging of indigenous social and human capital, Black communities overcome this relative lack of economic capital (Morris, 1984). This pattern is seen in environmental justice efforts nationwide, as often organizers either fought for civil rights in the 1960s or have older family members who did so. This organization was based on community organizations, most notably the Black church.

Additionally, how social standing and employment influence how people resist environmental justice. More established leaders who may be sympathetic to the environmental

justice movement may not be able to take as drastic of direct action as those on the ground.

Additionally, Black people make up a large part of the employment base of some of Houston's most polluting industries. Bullard warned of this situation in his study of emerging Southern cities, when he writes that "poverty in the South represented cheap labor" (Bullard, 1991).

This begs the question, How do people protest the processes of environmental pollution which also provide some employment? A policy that attacks pollution must address economic compensation for the community members afflicted. It also must build off community strategies of development and resistance to environmental harm.

### Steps Toward Healing: Policy Discussion

*But I mean, those are the basic tenants of. what we're out for, this is what we're out to do is create an environment that I can live in 20 years. Where my kids feel that I'm safe and I can be safe and I can live a rather independent life if I'm still in any condition to live independently.*

Just like much of the country, East Little York is at an environmental crossroads. Continued pollution of East Little York combined with an aging population of homeowners may eventually lead to bleaker economic options for the area's tax base that further relies on environmentally hazardous industries. Another bleak outcome could also be the gentrification of the area, as it is only 20 minutes from Downtown Houston. The land in Northeast Houston is cheaper and more abundant than in the more developed Western half of the city and it is beginning to be bought by large developers for speculative purposes. As the city continues to grow, there is an increasing chance that spaces like East Little York could face the same threat of communities, such as Houston and Trinity Gardens, are dealing with to its south.

Additionally, environmental cleanups often lead to gentrification, as seen in spaces worldwide from the regeneration of Brooklyn's riverfront to London's Olympic Village in Stratford. Policy to combat **both** the increased proliferation of pollutants and gentrification is necessary for the betterment of East Little York. Each portion of the East Little York Redevelopment Project is based on stated community needs and actions already being taken in the space. Basically, I look to maneuver resources to community wants and movements already occurring, taking a bottom-up approach to this diagnosis, which emphasizes the development of physical and social infrastructure. Below are the key points of the plan.



## Environmental Enforcement



East Little York's location in Northeast Houston puts it in one of the most toxic parts of Harris County. To protect the health of the community's residents and increase the area's desirability for investors, it is necessary to stop the inflow of environmental LULUs. Therefore, the East Little York Redevelopment Project would end city permitting of environmentally harmful facilities in East Little York. Additionally, it would fund the placement of air monitors near East Little York's heaviest polluters. Lastly, more resources would be given to the City of Houston's Solid Waste Management Department for the enforcement of illegal dumping, which one community resident called "the biggest threat to our environment". This enforcement agency would work alongside community partners who have documented illegal dumping sites. The

need to move resources to city enforcement is especially essential given the extremity of harm the reactionary Texas State government currently perpetuates.

### **Going to Trade School: Beautification and Improvement Pt. 1**

Community residents already take an active role in shaping the landscape of their respective subdivisions, however, more resources should be allotted to aid residents in this mission. In this plan, the city would pay people at least \$17.30/hour, which is the living wage in Harris County (MIT Living Wage Calculator). There would be a strong preference for community residents and Black and Latinx people to clean up the area. While this plan is not foolproof, as in the current day, it would most likely go to a landfill near a Black community, this process removes some of the immediate harm from illegal dumping, provides financial support to community residents, and also leads to greater communal investment in the affairs of the area.

Additionally, home improvement programs for seniors are also a method of community improvement. Interns interested in trades such as construction, electrical wiring, or HVAC certification could work through trade programs at the local HCC (Houston Community College) branch that connects them with an apprenticeship in the area in which the city pays them and a mentor to conduct home repairs or improvements. In historically redlined and environmentally violated communities, home improvement loans are hard to obtain. This program aids older residents maintain their property and helps the community appear more vibrant. This process is especially important for older residents who have lived in the area for a long time and are on fixed incomes. Resident Marcia A., who is in this position said:

*“I live on a property that's 80 by 200. I can easily put a pool in my backyard. I have the money to do it, but if I asked the bank to finance it, they're looking at me kind of sideways. Well, there's a truck yard on the corner visit, there's a, you know, dumpsite.”*

These apprenticeships also allow younger residents to pick up trades they can then use to reinvest in their community. There are already resources through HCC, as they recently completed a \$50 million development in the area and many classes, according to a campus employee “can’t fill the seats.” The primary expenses would therefore be paying both mentors and apprentices.

### **In the Studio: Beautification and Improvements Pt. 2**

While it would take more targeted advertisement to get younger adults to trade apprenticeships, there is a lot of enthusiasm behind the arts. This can be seen when a local HCC manager brought 50 Cent to the area:

*“Now they signed up to get in there because I had 50 Cent was in town and I had him come by the campus so he could see it. and then put it out there so everybody can see 50 Cents is here. He's messing around in his audio lab. He said, well, I'm gonna take that class. So they filled up every seat.”*

Funding of community art centers that provide resources for visual and audio art projects through the East Little York Redevelopment Project can give all residents a constructive outlet for expression and can also allow for the empowerment of the community and personal expression. Galleries, plays, concerts, etc. in public spaces can also serve as a site for gatherings and community development.

### **Transportation Infrastructure**

One of the key concerns for community leader Doris C. was the lack of mixed-use development in this portion of the city:

*“And so if I want, if I really thought hard about it, I'd replace a vacant lot with a four story or five story housing, affordable housing for my seniors, where they could go to the doctor and have*

*a restaurant and go to the dentist and, and ten thousand other things on the bottom floor and live on top. They do it in every major city in the country. Why is Houston so different?"*

To achieve the density necessary for these structures, Houston must bolster its non-automobile-based transportation infrastructure. This is especially important in minority communities with lower average incomes where car ownership is lower. Complaints about bus frequency are high in the area. Additionally, bus routes are highly sporadic, as many zip zag throughout the city, taking large amounts of time to cover Houston's vast area. These complaints are well warranted, as not just the process of riding, but also waiting on buses in Houston is tiring. Bus stops are placed in intervals sometimes as far as a quarter of a mile from each other and often, there is little separation between the stop and the road. Sometimes there are no sidewalks at all. In the summer months, the lack of shade at many bus stops makes the almost 100-degree weather unbearable.

Part of the infrastructure development plan should be the widening of sidewalks and the planting of roadside trees to encourage more foot traffic to and from local businesses and bus stations. This plan has been implemented in Midtown and that area has seen a large increase in pedestrian traffic. Additionally, every bus stop in East Little York should have better waiting facilities with benches and a shade cover. The construction and maintenance of these public transit improvements can be a boon for the area's economy. Public infrastructure projects increase employment and reduce the cost of providing housing (Albouy 2022). This information builds on Keynesian economic models, showing that government investment increases economic output. Light rails can also bring about business corridors in less dense or economically disadvantaged areas. This pattern is evident on portions of Houston's light rail along Harrisburg

Blvd., as a greater number of cafes, residential developments, and art installations have arisen in the predominantly Latinx, a formerly industrial region east of Downtown.

### **Grants for Public Improvements**

While city funding can provide funding for public improvements, the day-to-day action must come from the community members themselves. For example, one of the biggest asks from community residents was about a grocery store. In response to a shortage of this facility, the NEHRC has been providing the area with a farmer's market for the past 3 years as an alternative. Black communities working with the land to both sustain and create greater opportunity is both a historic resistance strategy and is still used in many spaces afflicted by food apartheid and economic degradation today (White, 2019).

Instead of financing larger chains to come in and provide potentially inferior service to Black nonprofits and entrepreneurs from the area to expand operations to host necessary businesses like grocery stores. Additionally, this internal community growth can attract larger businesses to site in the area of their own volition. Therefore, the East Little York Redevelopment Project will emphasize an increase in grant money for nonprofits, businesses, and community groups whose leaders live in Northeast Houston (areas in the city limit North of the I-610, East of the US-59, and inside Beltway 8). Most importantly, this aspect of the policy appeals to the culture of self-governance and independence fostered in Black Texans.

### **Moving Towards Renewables**

The whole world is currently at a crossroads in the face of climate change. A concerted effort to shift to renewable energy must happen extremely quickly. Houston is the worldwide energy capital and despite the pressures of the oil and gas industry, it is starting to make somewhat of a pivot towards renewables, and for sound business purposes.

The fossil fuel industry has also been consistently propped up by world governments, receiving \$5.9 trillion in 2020 alone (Perry, 2021). However, unsubsidized energy generation from fossil fuels is not the most cost-effective measure of energy creation, and the gap between the cost of renewables and fossil fuels will continue to grow as renewable energy sources become more efficient. Aiding in the decreasing attractiveness of fossil fuels are divestment efforts from nonprofits and hedge funds. Between 2013 and 2020, divestment conservatively rose from \$53 billion to \$12 trillion, a remarkable increase (Blackrock). As more firms divest, fossil fuels will decrease in profitability. This is especially true as other countries move away from fossil fuels. European countries such as Germany and France produce more than half of their energy from carbon-neutral sources.

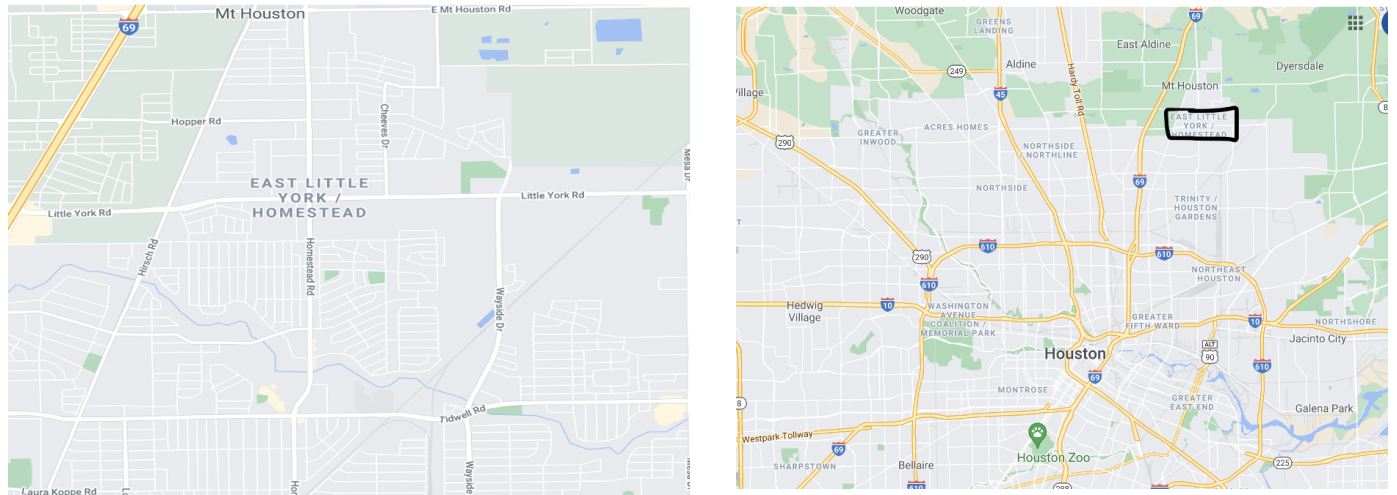
In this energy transition, it is essential that marginalized spaces such as East Little York can be trained into the new renewable energy economy. The East Little York HCC should offer its Solar Photovoltaic Installer Certificate for free, allowing community residents to be trained in solar installation without cost. In addition, the benefits of engaging with this type of work should be magnified, including the possibility of one day owning one's own installation company. Additionally, the graduates from this program could be funded by the city to solarize local residents and businesses in the area. This type of investment in community members to do work to aid the community keeps money in the area, which can lead to community betterment that staves off the negative effects of gentrification.

## **Discussion**

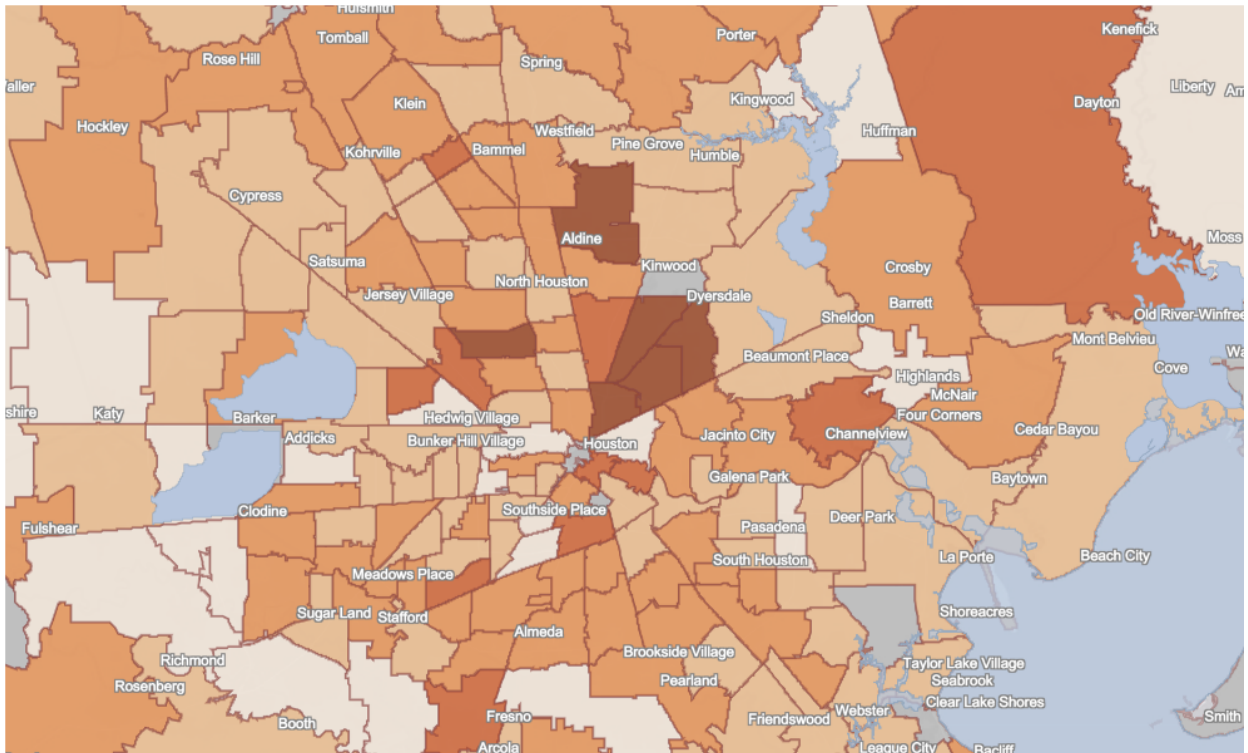
In the face of a conservative state government and a city that profits greatly from some of America's most polluting industries, it will take a bit of time to depollute and truly center the most marginalized communities. However, grassroots collective, economic, and spiritual growth

will allow for a greater community in which residents have more leverage to push against environmental racism, infrastructure development, and better economic alternatives. Creating a plan of action that centers resident agency and allows them to work with expanded resources is key to advancing the interests of the community and greatly improving the health and economic fortunes of the space.

### Appendix



*East Little York within Greater Houston*



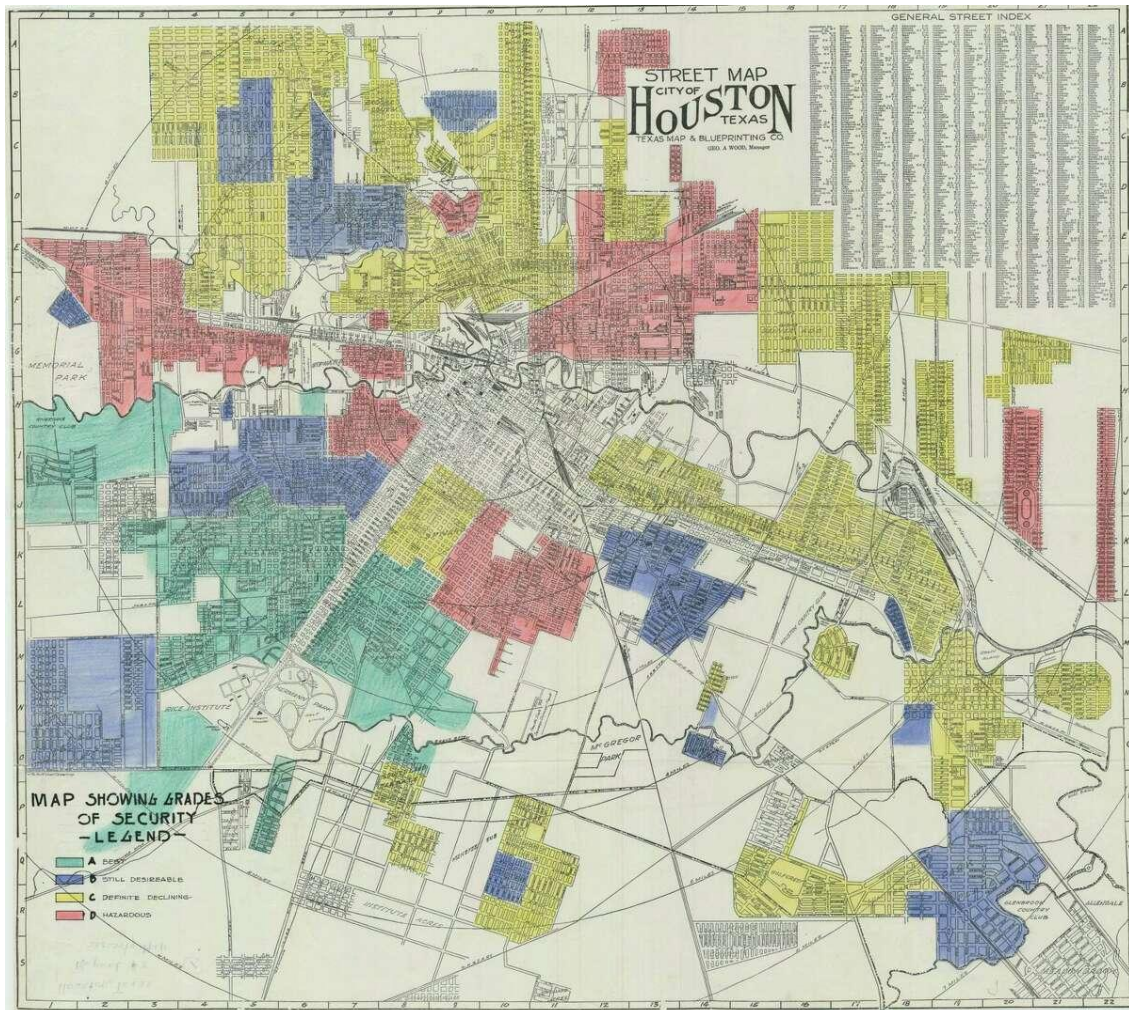
*Map of Houston IMR Rates by Zip Code (Agarwal, et al)*



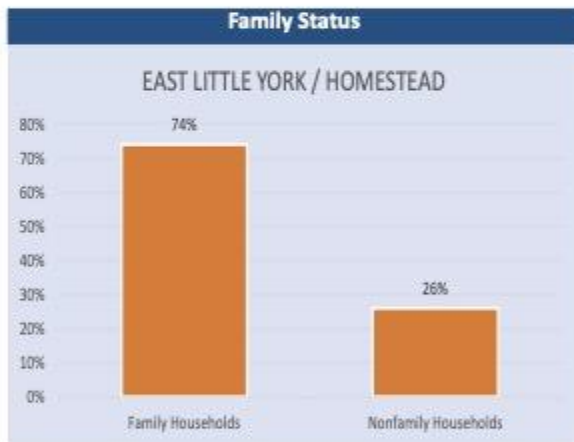
77026 IMR per 1000 residents	
Overall IMR	12.47
Black IMR	16.93
Harris County IMR per 1000 residents	
Overall IMR	5.8
Black IMR	10.7

*77026 is the East Little York Zip Code*

Story Map Series,” utsys, The University of Texas System, accessed July 20, 2021.  
<https://utsys-pop-health.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=305e4fe68d764eaa8106fddab5bb0e2>



(Above) Houston Redlining Map; (Below) ELY Demographics



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000  
American Community Survey, 2015-2019 Estimates



*East Little York Home Ownership Rates, Employment Status, and Family Information***Super Neighborhood 47 (2019)**

Total Population	22,349
% Black	68
% White (Non-Latinx)	1
% Latinx	31
% Asian	0
Median Income	\$36,003

**City of Houston (2019)**

Total Population	2,310,432
% Black	22
% White (Non-Latinx)	24
% Latinx	45
% Asian	7
Median Income	\$46,187

*Super Neighborhood vs Houston Population Comparison*

Year	Total Population	% Black
1950	7,220	.70
1960	11,843	.68
1970	3,792	93.0
1980	7,755	89.0



*Change in Census Tract Data near Whispering Pines Landfill*

**Photos**



*Northwood Manor Street*





*Boat dumped near homes behind landfill*



*Continual anti-dumping activism*







*Abandoned shopping center*



*East Little York Mart*





*Northeast Houston Farmer's Market*



*J.T Trotter Park*



*Whispering Pines Protests*



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