

The Black Neighborhood: An Endangered Species

Written by Jeffrey L. Boney, Associate Editor
Wednesday, 27 February 2013 00:00



Why African American Communities Are Being Forced To Fight For Survival To Avoid Extinction

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the term *'gentrification'* is defined as *"the process of renewal and rebuilding accompanying the influx of middle-class or affluent people into deteriorating areas that often displaces poorer residents."*

For years, in Houston, developers and activists have squabbled over *'gentrification'* and the struggle to preserve the history and culture of certain areas of town that have long been considered traditional African-American neighborhoods.

Another term found in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, *'disenfranchised,'* is defined as *"depriving someone of a legal right, or some privilege or immunity."*

You may have heard or become more familiar with the term, *'disenfranchised,'* during last year's election, where civil rights and community activists spoke out against the Voter ID bills that were introduced and even passed in states like Texas. Many of the activists and even Attorney General Eric Holder argued that these Voter ID bills would disenfranchise the voting rights of U.S. citizens, particularly African-Americans.

All one has to do is look at the state of many traditional African-American neighborhoods in Houston to catch a true glimpse of how *'gentrification'* has played a significant role in adversely affecting the livelihoods of African-Americans in Houston along with how African-Americans are

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being severely *'disenfranchised'* on a daily basis; being forced to fight for their own survival in today's society.

COMMUNITY UNDER ATTACK

Many activists and community residents believe that the Black community and its historical, cultural and economical roots are under attack. Traditional African American schools are being closed at an alarming rate; tax dollars and resources are not being distributed equitably; parents are being forced to bus their children to schools outside of their neighborhoods to receive a quality education; drainage issues remain; streets and sidewalks are in need of repair; grocery stores are absent; and police brutality is often reported.

Colonel John Richard Boyd was a United States Air Force fighter pilot and former Pentagon consultant whose theories have been highly influential in the world of military, sports and business. According to Boyd, all intelligent organisms and organizations undergo a continuous cycle of interaction with their environment and his synopsis was that the key to any victory is the ability to create situations wherein someone can make appropriate decisions more quickly than their opponent. Boyd's central belief was that situations often change, and as a result it is sometimes necessary to cancel a planned action in order to meet the changes. That decision cycle is what's known as the OODA loop, which Boyd deemed to be the central mechanism that is critical for survival.

The African American community is going to need to make some tough decisions if they hope to survive the challenges that many of the very institutions and amenities, that are critical to long-term sustainability and growth of the Black community, are facing.

One of the biggest issues taking center stage involving the African American community in Houston is the issue centered on quality education.

MORE HISD BLACK SCHOOL CLOSURES

Four community meetings were scheduled this past Tuesday to discuss the Houston

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Independent School District's (HISD's) plan to move students out of two traditionally African American schools by the end of this school year.

Under the plan, the current student bodies of Sterling and Jones high schools would be combined into a single campus on a permanent basis. Students from Sterling would move to the Jones campus and remain there while the new Sterling campus is under construction as part of the recently approved HISD bond program. The school would operate as a single campus, with all students joining together to compete on the same academic and athletic teams. The new campus, which is slated to open in late 2016 or early 2017, would have all students who are currently zoned to Jones, re-zoned to the new school. HISD states that the new campus will be a \$72.3 million campus, capable of supporting modern technology and accommodating the latest approaches to collaborative learning.

Many community residents found HISD's plan disturbing, including Sunnyside Gardens/Bayou Estates Civic Club President and Sunnyside/South Park Super neighborhood Vice President Travis McGee.

"HISD is killing our community one school at a time," says McGee. "They fired over 700 teachers over two years ago; closed 4 schools; gave out millions in bonuses to Superintendent Terry Grier and to select HISD employees; extended Grier's contract; gave out contracts to friends; wasted millions of dollars on the Apollo program; cut programs only in the hood; and have closed a total of 19 schools since 2010. When you have 19 fewer schools and 700 fewer teachers and when the HISD budget is \$1.6 billion, shouldn't HISD have a surplus instead of continuously lying to us about having a deficit? If we continue to ignore the obvious, then we are the problem and not the solution."

McGee believes that HISD will fire more teachers in traditional African American communities and will ask Houstonians for more money in the next 4 to 5 years to build elementary and middle schools and fears that Black people will vote for the bonds again.

"We need to vote with common sense versus nonsense," says McGee. "Do y'all remember the signs that put in front of Jones High School asking you to vote for the bond to improve Jones? Well, you voted for the bonds and now they are talking about closing Jones and bringing Sterling High kids over there, when and if they even begin construction on Sterling. They blame it on enrollment, but when you kill and move all the programs, of course parents will move their kids. We really need to wake up."

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In addition to the Jones/Sterling plan, students currently zoned to Ryan Middle School would be permanently rezoned to nearby Cullen Middle School beginning this summer.

HISD believes that by combining all of these student bodies, the larger schools will have additional funding needed to offer a stronger variety of academic course offerings and other services to students. Ryan is currently the smallest neighborhood middle school in HISD, with fewer than 300 students. The Jones campus has the capacity to hold 1,500 students, but enrollment has dropped below 500. Because HISD funds schools based on enrollment, schools with few students struggle to offer elective courses that are outside of the basic core curriculum and also offer fewer extra-curricular activities.

Ryan would be renamed **The Medical and Health Professions Academy at Ryan Middle School**. This district-wide magnet middle school would seek to prepare more students to compete for admission into the highly selective DeBakey High School for the Health Professions. Last week, the HISD Board of Education voted to seek federal grant dollars to help start the new school.

Larry McKenzie, a former HISD instructor, has been a staunch opponent of HISD's plans and has vigorously spoken out against HISD and their treatment of Black schools for years.

"We need schools, but we need new schools with programs," says McKenzie. "Having new school buildings in our neighborhoods without the programs to sustain them is like having a gun with no bullets in it."

McKenzie points out that Jones, who is slated to receive money in the most recent bond proposal, is another example of what he believes is a systematic attempt to choke the life out of the Black community.

"HISD specifically targeted the South Park area by placing charter schools in the area and removing funding for academic programs," says McKenzie. "Closing schools kills communities and contributes to gentrification in those communities. The HISD school board wants to consolidate Ryan Middle School and Cullen Middle School and then rebuild Ryan, and then

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change the name. I don't see anything wrong with keeping the name of one of our community icons, Mr. James D Ryan. At the rate they are going, I can only assume that Jack Yates High School will be next on the chopping block."

Community activists say they will continue to speak out against these HISD proposals and plan to use these actions as a tool to light a fire under other disenfranchised citizens.