

# EDITORIAL

## Improving cultural life for Austin's minorities will enrich us all

EDITORIAL BOARD

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We didn't need a survey to tell us that Austin lacks a vibrant cultural scene for African Americans, and that the shortage of live music venues, theater and dance companies that capture the African American experience impairs the quality of life for black people.

We also don't need a poll to know that expanding Austin's African American cultural infrastructure is something that would benefit the entire city and boost its economy.

But that bit of common sense now has the blessing of a city task force and the endorsement of the City Council. The detailed two-year plan sprouted mainly from committees of citizens who worked with city staff to devise ways to make Austin a more welcoming city for African Americans.

The recommendations cover six areas: economic development, employment and education, health, neighborhood sustainability, police and public safety and arts, culture and entertainment.

The unique problems black people face in Austin didn't crop up overnight, and as City Manager Toby Futrell said, they won't be solved in a day, week or year. For the near future, we believe that improving police procedures (as we explained in Thursday's editorial) and expanding cultural infrastructure offer great potential for improving the quality of African American life. That doesn't mean that the city should shelve longer-term solutions. But expanding cultural infrastructure not only would brand Austin as a city that celebrates all of its cultures, but would boost Austin's economy.

So it was good news to learn that the city will help sponsor new African American cultural events in 2006, including a black film festival that the University of Texas is bringing to town in February, and an urban music festival in April. The city already gives support to the Austin Film Society and to the South by Southwest festival, which both plow money back into the city's economy.

The city should make additional investments in cultural infrastructure with a priority on those that can ultimately generate revenue. Instead of creating a cultural arts fund for black artists, the city should invest in a few arts groups, particularly the Pro Arts Collective, which has an established record in producing black theater, dance and arts events. The collective was founded by Boyd Vance, who died this year. The group has been hindered by a lack of steady revenue and a permanent home. Why not base the organization in the new Carver Cultural Center, which already has a theater named for Vance? Dividing the money among dozens of black groups has not helped any take hold and grow.

A second recommendation we think makes sense is establishing a cultural heritage and entertainment district in the East 11th and East 12th street corridors in East Austin. The makings of such a district are already there with the Victory Grill, Carver Museum and Cultural Center and Huston-Tillotson University. The Austin Revitalization Authority, which is redeveloping those neighborhoods, is the logical vehicle for making the redevelopment happen. Leaving redevelopment to the city's master planning process, as the city suggests, might result in a good idea getting bogged down in bureaucracy.

Some have complained that the city's focus should be on improving the quality of life for all, and they reject the idea of race-specific remedies. That's a hollow argument because the problems that now demand solutions were the result of race-based policies.

Austin's history of segregation, and in particular its 1920s resettlement plan, concentrated black Austinites east of what today is Interstate 35. Added to that are decades of neglect of East Austin's infrastructure, red-lining of East Austin businesses, inequitable funding of schools in those areas and the locating of dumps, tank farms and welfare housing in those communities. Those were assaults on Austin's black community. As taxpayers, African Americans were certainly shortchanged as their dollars largely were channeled west. So there is nothing wrong with designing policies to reverse that historical damage.