



Web Posted: 08/08/2009 12:00 CDT

The restoration of Dignowity Hill

by - Express-News

Hector Gonzalez has seen the ups and downs of Dignowity Hill, and he says the neighborhood is on its way up again.

Gonzalez has lived all of his 60 years in a bungalow-style home there built in 1928. He remembers when the historic East Side neighborhood was dotted with corner groceries and icehouses.

After a decline that began in the 1950s, Dignowity Hill is becoming a destination for artists and professionals who are buying up some of the big historic homes in the neighborhood and renovating them.

Highway construction in the 1950s and 1960s drove residents north to Alamo Heights, Monte Vista and Terrell Hills and many of the houses were converted to rental space and property values began declining, Gonzalez said. A slow recovery began in 1983, when the city named Dignowity Hill a historic neighborhood, and has picked up significantly in the last five years, he said.

The neighborhood is benefiting as well from the city's East Side Reinvestment Plan. Part of that plan includes restoring the Hays Street Bridge, a 19th century bridge that was moved to San Antonio in 1910 and closed to traffic in 1982. It will be part of a pedestrian and bicycle path from Dignowity Hill to downtown San Antonio. Gonzalez is part of a group working with the city to restore the bridge.

A committee this year has been trying to find ways to encourage private and public improvements in Dignowity Hill, said Patrick Howard, assistant director for Planning and Development Services. The committee is looking at improving infrastructure, finding use for vacant lots in the neighborhood and changing the zoning in some commercial areas to allow for less intense development more suitable for a residential neighborhood, Howard said.

The city's Community Development Advisory Committee will unveil its plans next month, he said.

The neighborhood began in the 1850s as San Antonio's first exclusively residential neighborhood, according to the San Antonio Office of Historic Preservation. Gonzalez refers to the 150-year-old neighborhood that began as large estates, one on each block, as San Antonio's first suburb. According to the Office of Historic Preservation the first houses in the area were built on a hill named after Dr. Anthony M. Dignowity.

Those old estates are making Dignowity Hill a destination for people who want to refurbish old mansions, said Jack Allen, a real estate agent who has been working in the neighborhood for the last

That year she bought and moved into a concrete-walled house built in 1918. Some parts of the neighborhood are in need of infrastructure improvements, but Dignowity Hill has turned around since she moved there, Casanova said.

Quirky events such as an annual pushcart derby, now in its fifth year, make Dignowity Hill unique, Casanova said. "It's a really diverse community," Casanova said. "You have a lot of different professionals in the neighborhood, artists, teachers. It's really pretty amazing."

It's not all about the old mansions, said Allen, the real estate agent. The blocks have long since been filled in by smaller homes, and many of them have their own history and character, he said.

And there has been a more recent movement to renovate some of those smaller homes and sell them.

A house on the corner of Pine and Hays streets, about half the size of the house Allen has listed a few blocks south, is listed at \$58,900. The house needs work on its foundation, said Rogelio Olguin, the real estate agent who listed the property. It's a good investment, Olguin said, because as more people come into Dignowity Hill and renovate old houses, property values will rise.

Across Hays Street from that home, work is under way renovating another of the neighborhood's smaller houses.

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three years.

"It's kind of an unusual market because it's got to appeal to people who want to buy or own historical homes," Allen said.

There are big historic homes for sale up and down North Pine Street, which bisects the neighborhood. Renovated, those homes run from \$125,000 to \$250,000, Allen said. He has a three-bedroom house built in 1909 listed for \$195,000 on Pine Street.

The old neighborhood with its history and diversity provides an added charm, he said.

"I really love that area over there, and as a real estate agent, it's really interesting to me how that place has come along," Allen said.

While there are 100-year-old homes with big columns and wraparound porches selling for \$50,000 in Dignowity Hill, their pier and beam foundations have deteriorated, they don't have air conditioning, the heating systems are outdated and dangerous and the houses lack insulation, Allen said. Restoring those houses can be a big project.

Juan and Barb Garcia in 2007 bought a one-story, 100-year-old house on Pine Street with hardwood floors and a large porch. It didn't look like much when they bought it. The house had fallen off its foundation, but the Garcias knew a gem when they saw it.

They paid \$40,000 for the house and spent "at least four times that" restoring it, Juan Garcia said. Despite the issues with the foundation, the house still had most of its original windows and the frame was undamaged. And the Garcias, who had been living in Pecan Valley, say they love the house and the neighborhood.

"A lot of the appeal is there's a lot of good housing stock, if you have the will and the resources to restore it," Juan Garcia said.

The other part of the appeal is the people in the neighborhood, Barb Garcia said.

"This side of town, historically people kind of looked down their noses at it," she said. "I've never felt unsafe here. The people in this neighborhood are very friendly. You can go for a walk and end up on someone's front porch."

Juan Garcia is president of the neighborhood association and has started his own blog, View From the Hill, at www.dhsa1.blogspot.com, about life in Dignowity Hill. In it he writes about everything from issues facing the community to the sprawling cemeteries on the south end of the neighborhood.

"This whole area is really pretty cool," Juan Garcia said. "There's a lot of history here."

When Liz Casanova wanted to move from Castroville to Dignowity Hill in 1995, her real estate agent warned her against it.

Cherry Street, which runs through Dignowity Hill, had a reputation as a haunt for prostitutes and drug addicts, and that reputation had tainted the entire neighborhood, Casanova said.

"It was a very different neighborhood here in that time," she said.

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"It's going to be a really sharp looking home," Allen said.

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