

# HOUSTON★CHRONICLE

## Long-overlooked East Aldine on cusp of transformation

By Mike Snyder

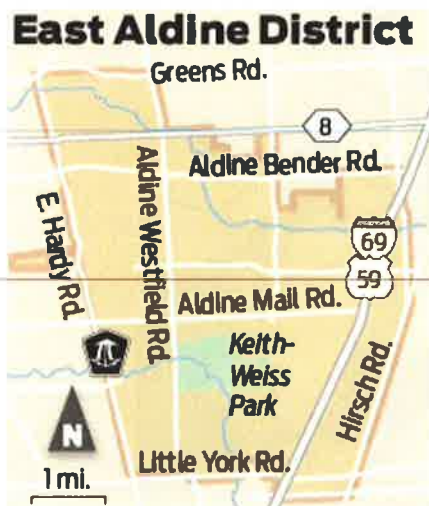
Published May 2, 2016

You'd be hard-pressed to find a Starbucks in any of the strip centers in East Aldine, a sprawling collection of neighborhoods in unincorporated northeast Harris County. Most of the businesses are homegrown, and many cater to the needs of the largely Latino clientele, selling items like international money orders and Salvadoran treats: "*Envios y mas.*" "*Panaderia y pupuseria.*"

Some of these shops started out as stalls in area flea markets. The owners' willingness to expand and take risks reflects an adventurous, entrepreneurial streak that seems baked into the community. It's one way East Aldine survives even though it always seems to be out of the room when the Houston area's movers and shakers pass out baubles like growth and prosperity.



Businesses on residential streets, like this tire and muffler shop, are common in East Aldine. (Mike Snyder/Houston Chronicle)



Now the East Aldine Management District and a powerhouse nonprofit, Neighborhood Centers Inc., are working with other partners on a potentially transformative project for the community. I'll tell you more about that in Friday's column, but first I want to introduce you to this area, home to about 50,000 people.

If the American Midwest is flyover country, East Aldine is drive-past country. It's an in-between place - between the North Loop and the Sam Houston Tollway. Between urban and suburban. Between the analog 20th century and the digital 21st.

Here are some things I saw in a half-dozen visits over the past few weeks:

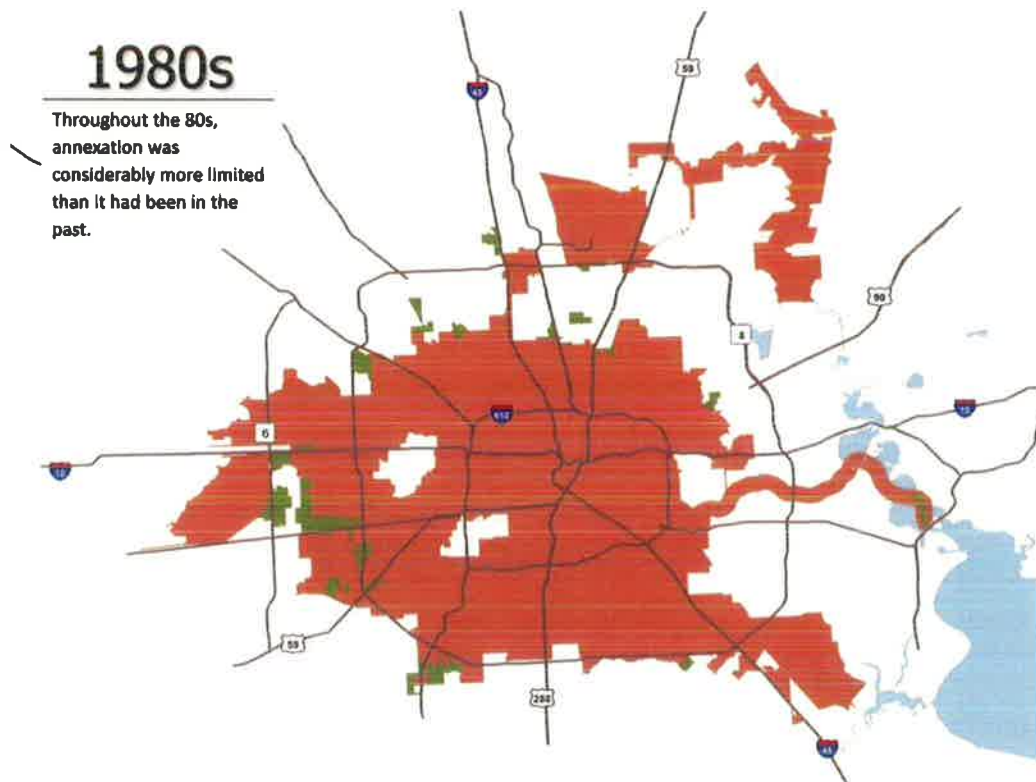
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A burro tied to a fence outside someone's home. A tire and muffler shop, festooned with colorful signs and banners, in the middle of a block lined with single-family houses. A kid walking precariously along a curb on a busy street with no sidewalk, holding his arms at his sides for balance like a circus performer without a pole. A sign advertising septic-tank cleaning services.

The sign caught my eye; it seemed out of place just 15 miles from downtown Houston. Septic tanks are for people who live out in the country, right? But as it turns out, about half of the homes in East Aldine use septic tanks and water wells, according to the management district's website.

The reasons for this curious state of affairs involve the unique way Houston grew from a hamlet at the junction of two bayous into a behemoth of more than 600 square miles. City officials annexed land aggressively during the mid- to late 20th century, a strategy intended to prevent Houston from being encircled by small cities that would choke off growth.

But planners skipped over certain areas for economic reasons, and Aldine was one of them. Houston had snapped up areas to the north, including the land that would become Lake Houston and Bush Intercontinental Airport, in the '50s and '60s. But in the '80s, when it might have been Aldine's turn, Houston was gripped by an oil bust even worse than the one it's experiencing now. Aldine lacked the tax base to justify annexation, planners concluded, so the wells and septic tanks remained.



A map produced by the city planning department shows large areas in white, including East Aldine, that were passed over during a time of aggressive annexation. (*City of Houston*)

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Some of the wells are shallow and susceptible to contamination from the septic systems, said David Hawes, the management district's executive director. Just a few years ago, he recalled, state water officials remarked that conditions in Aldine were "worse than any colonia on the border."

The area's needs extend beyond water and sewer services.

"We don't have a lot of sidewalks or street lights," said Iris Lopez, 17, a senior at MacArthur High School in the Aldine school district. I met Lopez on a weekend afternoon when she and some friends had set up tables in the school parking lot to sell disposable diapers, laundry detergent and other items. They were raising money for the school prom.

Just down the road from where we spoke, a vast empty lot was being prepared for millions of dollars in new investment. It could lead to better opportunities for young people like Lopez.

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## In East Aldine, 'revitalization' requires methodical approach

*By Mike Snyder  
Published May 5, 2016*

In a community where half the adults lack a high school degree or its equivalent, the need to improve access to education is obvious and compelling.

With this in mind, the board of the East Aldine Management District instructed its staff in 2011 to find a location where the Lone Star community college system could establish a workforce training program. It would provide an affordable way for the children of immigrants and blue-collar workers to learn a marketable skill after graduating from high school. Forty percent of the households in East Aldine earn \$25,000 a year or less, putting a four-year university out of reach for all but the most gifted students who might earn full scholarships.



Landscaping and signage are among the improvements made by the East Aldine Management District. (Mike Snyder/Houston Chronicle)



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"I worry about the thousands of kids in my community that are helpless," says state Rep. Armando Walle, a Houston Democrat who grew up in East Aldine and still lives there. "They have no aspirations."

## **Nurturing aspirations**

Finding a site for the workforce center - a place to nurture aspirations - was not difficult. Vacant land is abundant in this unincorporated community of 50,000 people in northeast Harris County, where new development has been inhibited by poverty, limited services and inadequate infrastructure - issues I explored in Tuesday's column. The management district, a surrogate for local government, acquired a 60-acre site on Aldine Mail Route, a commercial thoroughfare whose name explains its origins.

That's more land than the college system needed, but the district is making good use of the rest. It picked up some valuable partners: the Harris County Sheriff's Office, which has agreed to move its 911 call center to the site, and Neighborhood Centers Inc., Houston's largest nonprofit, which raised \$20 million to develop an "economic opportunity center" modeled on its nationally acclaimed Baker-Ripley campus in the Gulfton area of southwest Houston.

The call center will provide an estimated 175 jobs when it opens and perhaps more later. Neighborhood Centers will offer many of the same programs that have flourished at Baker-Ripley: tax preparation, retail training and employment opportunities, a health center, a play area for kids, and more.

## **Advantages lacking**

Some neighborhoods need more help than others to achieve the elusive goal known as "revitalization," a word that can cover everything from utility system improvements to displacement of the poor. Houston's Midtown area, for example, was an urban wasteland until market forces and demographic trends helped it to blossom. Young professionals and empty-nesters wanted walkable urbanism close to downtown; Midtown was the right place for it.

A place like East Aldine lacks these organic advantages. It's too far from downtown, and has too many problems, to attract a lot of infill development - the kind that has flourished in Midtown. Yet it also lacks the vast, empty greenfields that suburban developers need for new master-planned communities.

Neighborhood Centers had encountered similar conditions in Gulfton, and in East Aldine it applied the same strategy that helped it succeed with Baker-Ripley: Identify community assets, then support and strengthen them.

The nonprofit spent months meeting with residents to learn about their needs. Its researchers dug deeply into the neighborhood, generating data like the income and educational figures I cited earlier.

"We go where we are invited," Angela Blanchard, the president and CEO of Neighborhood Centers, told me over lunch recently. "We do what we are asked to do."

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## **Blight, or survival tools?**

In East Aldine, Neighborhood Centers found independence and resourcefulness. Scenes that an outsider might regard as markers of blight - a mobile home next to a single-family house, or a rusting, long-idle car - are, from another perspective, survival tools.

"We can put a trailer in our backyard when our family expands," says Blanchard, in the voice of a hypothetical resident. "We can have two cars in the driveway - one that runs and one for parts."

Anibeth Turcios, 32, who grew up in East Aldine and seems to know the history of every beauty shop and taqueria in the community, says the entrepreneurship classes provided by Neighborhood Centers will help small business owners who want to expand.

"There haven't been those classes that will take them to the next level," Turcios says.

Construction on the town center is expected to begin this summer, with all components open by 2018. A long-overlooked community is waiting.

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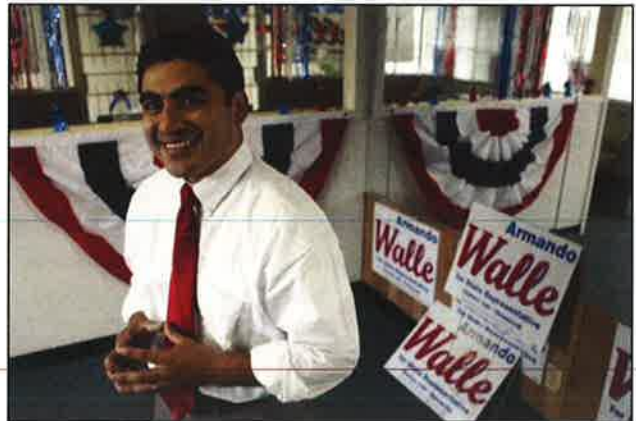
## **Some final thoughts on East Aldine**

*By Mike Snyder*

*Published May 6, 2016*

Ripley House community center in Houston's East End was a familiar hangout for Armando Walle when he was a kid, even though he lived about 10 miles north in East Aldine. Walle's godparents lived across the street from Ripley House, and during visits he saw the array of services it provided for residents of the mostly Latino, low-income surrounding community: early childhood education, for example, and activities for seniors.

"When I would go home, we didn't have that in my neighborhood," recalls Walle. "We needed something like that in Aldine. Our seniors would have liked a place to play bingo or loteria." Thirty years later, Walle is a Democratic state representative. He still lives in East Aldine, the community in northeast Harris County that I wrote about in two columns this past week.



State Rep. Armando Walle lives in East Aldine and represents the area in the Texas House of Representatives.

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Walle told me that his memories inspired him to appeal to Neighborhood Centers Inc., the nonprofit that runs Ripley House as well as the Baker-Ripley center in Gulfton, to establish a community center in East Aldine. The nonprofit eventually raised \$20 million for the project, which will begin construction soon.

"I hounded Angela," Walle said, referring to Angela Blanchard, the president and CEO of Neighborhood Centers.

Walle's roots in the community may have inspired his passion to try to improve it, but he's just one piece in a patchwork of people and agencies involved in the effort. (The city of Houston never annexed the Aldine area.) Harris County government provides some services, but counties lack ordinance-making power in Texas. The East Aldine Management District is leading the effort to develop a new town center.

In response to Tuesday's column, Dave Walden, County Commissioner Jack Morman's chief of staff, emailed to say that the county was working to provide water and sewer services to about 1,500 homes in the area. (Many residents use wells and septic tanks.) Still, Walden wrote, "Lots of work left to do."

Walle, in one of several tweets responding to my columns, put it differently: "Only the beginning."



Precinct 2 Harris County Commissioner Jack Morman represents the Aldine area.



## About the Author

Mike Snyder has been a Houston Chronicle journalist since January 1979, with alternating stints as a reporter and editor. His reporting assignments have included city government, transportation, housing and growth and development issues. Prior to joining the Chronicle he worked as a reporter for the Conroe Courier and the Galveston Daily News. He is a native of Corpus Christi and a graduate of the University of Houston.