

R I V A R D Report

City Considers Fast-Tracking Housing Displacement Prevention Policy



Owner-occupied rehabilitation of homes is one element of the Mayor's Housing Policy Task Force recommendations.
BONNIE ARBITTIER / RIVARD REPORT

After [hearing concerns](#) from affordable housing advocates that it's moving too slowly on developing policies to prevent housing displacement, the City of San Antonio is considering accelerating that process, officials said Tuesday.

The three-year plan to implement the recommendations of the Mayor's Housing Policy Task Force had called for spending 2020 on in-depth analysis and policy formation aimed at preventing housing displacement. Now, that so-called "root-cause assessment" could start this year – if City Council approves.

"Certainly it's a good step, and it should have been done yesterday," Maria Tijerina, a leader with of [COPS/Metro Alliance](#) and Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church, told the *Rivard Report*. "Displacement is happening now."

COPS/Metro Alliance members pressed Mayor Ron Nirenberg and the City in February to tackle gentrification and displacement more urgently. Councilwoman Shirley Gonzales (D5), who chairs a

Council subcommittee, has asked her colleagues to fast-track consideration of a shorter timeline for the study.

But to accelerate the root-cause displacement study, something has to give, Deputy City Manager Peter Zanoni told reporters Tuesday. City staff in the Neighborhood and Housing Services Department would have to either “reshuffle our business plan” and delay work on one of three other projects, or the City would have to find an estimated \$300,000 to hire a consultant to perform the displacement policy study and develop recommendations, Zanoni said. That number includes other costs associated with the study, including public engagement meetings.

“[The latter option] is one that [City Council] may like because it won’t cause us to have to stop doing something today,” he said.

After this article was originally published, Zanoni informed the Rivard Report that City staff, after a meeting between City Manager Erik Walsh and Mayor Ron Nirenberg, has decided to recommend using savings from other housing programs to fund a consultant that would perform the work that could take a year to 18 months to complete.

That recommendation will be presented to the Council’s Comprehensive Planning Committee on Wednesday. That committee can make the final decision on how to proceed, or not to proceed, with the study now. City Council would have to approve a contract with the consultant at a later date.

On Thursday, City Council will vote on the \$1 million Risk Mitigation Fund aimed at assisting people who have been or are about to be displaced because of rising rent, property taxes, or trouble paying mortgages. Eligibility for housing or relocation assistance through the fund would be based on income and demonstrated financial burden. Anyone making the local average median income or below could qualify, but benefits are scaled to increase for those who make 80 percent AMI or less.

The fund is intended to help an estimated 200 families, Zanoni said.

“Some people are worried that the money will run out, which it might,” he said.

The City, through its general fund and federal grants, already provides relocation assistance similar to the risk mitigation fund, said Veronica Soto, director of the Neighborhood and Housing Services Department (NHSD). But the roughly \$500,000 that comes from existing sources comes with tighter eligibility restrictions.

Meanwhile, the City is working on other initiatives that should help ease housing vulnerability, Soto said. It’s working with State Rep. Diego Bernal (D-San Antonio) on [proposed legislation](#) that would provide some school district tax relief for homes that have been occupied by the owner for at least 15 years, develop a coordinated housing system to connect homeowners in need with housing resources, carry out \$10 million in housing rehabilitation programs, and work on establishing Neighborhood Empowerment Zones that would freeze taxes for homeowners who invest in improving their homes in certain neighborhoods.

“When we fix up a home, we keep a family that lives there in that home,” Soto said. The mitigation fund is “a deliverable that we can address this year.”

Previous local work commissioned by the Housing Task Force and Housing Commission provided a baseline of housing conditions in San Antonio, Zanoni said, but much more in-depth study is needed to formulate policy on how to stop or manage displacement.

“Austin, as an example, spent a year developing what were the root causes [of housing displacement], but they have not done anything to improve them,” he said. “So it’s a two-step process.”

While the City of Austin has implemented numerous ways to mitigate displacement, none of the recommendations from its anti-displacement task force have been implemented, Zanoni added.

A 2018 report that identified potentially vulnerable neighborhoods provided “a foundation for the areas we need to focus on,” Soto said, “but we need to update that information and see if the numbers [in subsequent years hold true].” The report used data from 2000-2016.

Soto said City housing officials are coordinating with the Bexar Appraisal District on the City’s pending study of the property appraisal process.

Councilwoman Gonzales said she will file a council consideration request soon that would bump up the timeline for the root-cause study.

“I think that if we can find additional funding for a consultant that would be the best option [instead of delaying other work],” Gonzales told the *Rivard Report*. “We want to keep everything on track.”

Nirenberg established the Housing Policy Task Force in 2017. Its report and recommendations, which were adopted by City Council last year, include estimates for a 10-year funding plan that approaches \$3.9 billion in public and private money. Click [here](#) to download the 56-page report.

In an emailed statement, the mayor said he supports the accelerated timeline.

“One of the reasons that I [created the Mayor’s Housing Policy Task Force](#) was to ensure that families can live in decent, stable and affordable housing regardless of their income,” Nirenberg said. “The task force report established the framework for the current discussion, and I am encouraged by Council and staff’s participation in moving the task force agenda forward.”

The City’s fiscal year 2019 budget includes \$25 million for housing – the first budget to emphasize housing needs – and NHSD developed a three-year plan to implement the policy.

“[The City] couldn’t do everything at the same time,” Soto said, so the three-year plan was based on community feedback collected through the task force’s process.

Several members of COPS Metro and other affordable housing advocates said they will appear at the “Citizens to be Heard” portion of City Council’s weekly meeting at 6 p.m. Wednesday. They have invited Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller to speak in favor of the City addressing displacement.

Correction: This article has been updated to accurately reflect the estimated cost of the study \$300,000 and that the Comprehensive Plan Committee can authorize staff to accelerate the study timeline. It does not require a full City Council vote.