

A Neighborhood Under Attack

Hillcrest residents share their story



A Minton Street house sits in front of a Flint Hills Resources refinery. Corpus Christi's Hillcrest neighborhood has become populated by many refineries like it, which many have argued has led to negative health effects for the community.

PAUL FARIAS | FOGHORN NEWS

HISTORY OF HILLCREST

1944

HILLCREST WAS OPENED to African American residents as part of wider racial segregation efforts. Many minorities migrated to the neighborhood.

1950s

COMPANIES STARTED TO BUILD plants and factories around the Corpus Christi neighborhood of Hillcrest.

1960s

TEXAS STARTED BUILDING IH-37, which isolated Hillcrest from the rest of the city.

1972

CONSTRUCTION ON IH-37 IS COMPLETED, and more plants built, creating a hazardous area for residents.

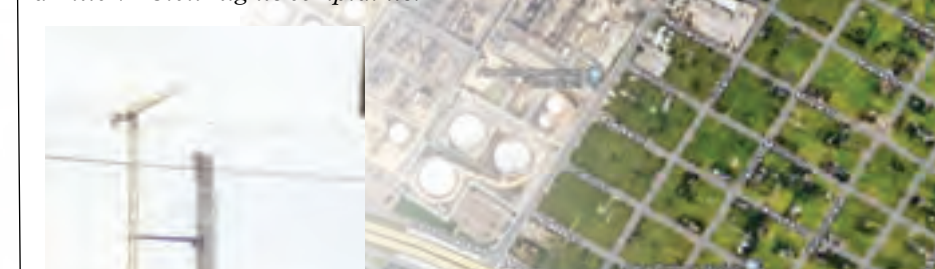
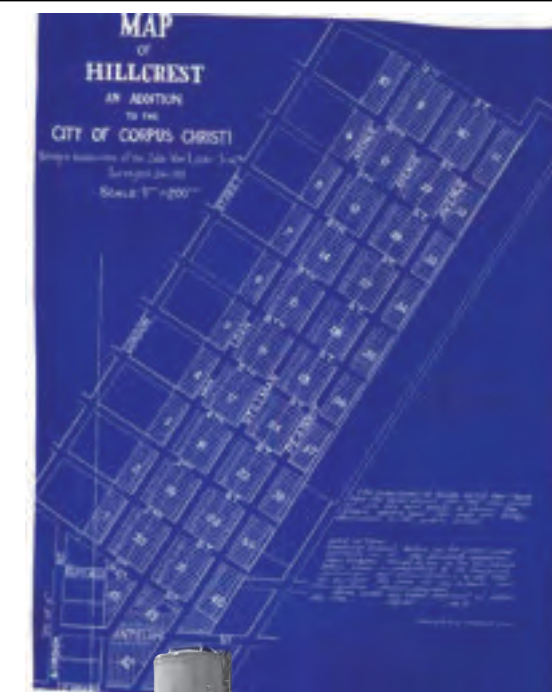
HILLCREST RESIDENTS SUED the refineries. They won the lawsuit and 100 houses were destroyed for a 'buffer zone' between the houses and refineries.

2003 - 2007

TEXAS WANTED TO BUILD a new bridge to replace Harbor Bridge.

The chosen route surrounded Hillcrest with facilities, the interstate, and the new bridge. It would have separated Hillcrest further.

In response, the Citizens' Alliance for Fairness & Progress, which opposed the project, was formed. It and Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid filed a Title VI Civil Rights complaint.



2013

THE PROJECT WAS PUT ON HOLD until a 2013 reconsideration. Of four options, the Red Alternative, which would have gutted the highway in a manner that cut off Hillcrest from the rest of the city, was approved.



TRLA

Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid

2015 - 2016

A TITLE VI COMPLAINT was filed in 2015. The replacement bridge was suspended until a buyout of Hillcrest was enacted by the Port of Corpus Christi.

The Harbor Bridge replacement broke ground on August 5, 2016, with a \$802M investment sponsored by TxDOT.

2022

A DESALINATION PLANT was proposed. It would be built in Hillcrest's buffer zone in between the houses and refineries. In response, Hillcrest residents filed a third Title VI complaint.

2024

THE TCEQ HOLDS a public meeting in the American Bank Center concerning the proposed desalination plant and its required wastewater permit. Many groups voiced their concerns about both.



DESALINATION FROM PAGE 1

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Hillcrest, a historically African American neighborhood first established in the Jim Crow-era, is no stranger to the industrialization of Corpus Christi, with refineries prominently located in their backyards.

It's an ongoing issue, accounting for the dwindling number of residents in the neighborhood over the years, and one the remaining residents figured had been settled when the federal government stepped in and offered a housing buyout back in 2015, after a Title VI lawsuit was filed with the U.S. Federal Highway Administration.

A buyout many remaining Hillcrest residents stated simply wasn't comparable enough and one they just couldn't afford in the long run.

"How could you afford the buyout?" said 65-year-old resident Lamont Taylor, as he explained the weight of the benefits not matching up.

"Say you have a 2,100-square-foot property and they decide to offer you a 1,500-square-foot property somewhere else. Is that fair? Is that equitable?"

For Henry Williams, another long-time resident, this neighborhood represents history, and one he simply refuses to leave behind.

"I live in the home that my father built," said Williams who later identified his father as Dr. H.J. Williams. "There are two parks in the Hillcrest neighborhood, and they are both named after my father who was one of the earliest civil rights leaders during the earliest Civil Rights Movement here in Corpus Christi."

Yet, after the chaos of the buyout subsided and the remaining residents assumed the city's industrial projects in that area would no longer take place, the location for Corpus Christi's newest desalination plant was revealed to the public in 2022.

The city's proposed Desalination Wastewater Treatment Plant had been originally labeled as the Inner Harbor project, a much broader term compared to the actual location of the Hillcrest neighborhood. "We were never informed beforehand,

we didn't even know that they considered the Inner Harbor Hillcrest," said Taylor. "We were simply told," said another long-time resident Daniel Pena. He explained the hopeless state many remaining residents were left in, who simply wanted to just piece what's left of their neighborhood back together again.

According to the residents, another shocking factor of the plan was the fact that the city was also planning on building the desalination plant within the neighborhood's designated buffer zone.

"The city had labeled the area as that themselves," said Taylor.

"It's like living next to an alarm clock that never shuts off."

LAMONT TAYLOR
65-YEAR RESIDENT

"They were not to build anything inside the buffer zone, and then the city just decided to do it anyway, without even letting us know beforehand."

Corpus Christi City Councilmember Jim Klein, who also opposes the Hillcrest plant, revealed that the facility could have been located just about anywhere else.

"The water that's going to be generated by this desalination plant, if it's built, is gonna provide water for the entire water system and city."

"So, you could really build the desal plant anywhere they have a water source. You can build it whether it's in the ship channel, you can build it over in Flour Bluff or you can build it along Ocean Drive," said Klein.

"We're convinced that this plant was simply a bad idea for the neighborhood and for the environment," said Williams.

"That it would be detrimental to the Hillcrest neighborhood in the sense that it

will deal with the decrease in our property values. It will also bring additional industrial problems close to contamination and eventually lead to the ultimate contamination of our waters."

As for the decision of this plant being next to a populated area, Klein also shared his opposing viewpoint to the majority of the council.

"It's not for a neighborhood, it's not going to be good for them. There may be air emissions from the desal plant, but at the very least there's gonna be a lot of noise from it as well."

"This is your grandmother, your grandfather, your great-grandmother you are doing this to," said Pena, as he identified the majority of remaining Hillcrest residents as seniors.

"So, who are they ultimately taking advantage of by doing this? The poor and the old."

As many residents see it, this plant is just another issue thrust onto the Hillcrest neighborhood by the industrialization projects of Corpus Christi.

Another issue they simply can't handle, tacked onto the long list of basic quality-of-life issues they are already facing, according to Pena.

"We can't keep neglecting what's going on in our neighborhood. There's corners without lights, people with tarps still over their roofs, even telephone poles falling over that have been that way since the storm of 2017 and still haven't been fixed," said Pena, as he explained the challenge of having to personally move out whole apartment complexes because sewage was backing up into the building.

"We're still trying but we're losing hope. There's nothing for the residents to grasp, the city has not made it available to us, so it's as simple as that."

Ultimately, it is the opinion of Pena and many others that, "desalination is a good idea when it's done the right way."

Which according to residents means not in our closed-bay system and certainly not next to their neighborhood.

As for the claims of some stating that the community of Hillcrest doesn't qualify as an actual neighborhood, Williams says it best.

"We don't allow other people to speak to who we are. We speak, we define who we are, and we are a neighborhood."



HENRY WILLIAMS
HILLCREST RESIDENT

PHOTO COURTESY OF CORPUS CHRISTI CALLER-TIMES