



In Jubilee Park, \$6M gift is reason for hope 📁

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T. Boone Pickens' \$6 million gift to the Jubilee Park neighborhood has people offering thanks and talking hope.

The billionaire oilman's donation last week will pay for a new community building. It will build a resource center with space for police and other government services. It will provide cash to buy and clear dilapidated property.

It is the latest, and perhaps most uplifting, move for a long-troubled area of South Dallas – one showing signs of reversing a deadening spiral of drugs, violence, crime and blight.

Work begun by a Dallas church 10 years ago keeps gaining ground.

Unofficially covering 62 blocks between Fair Park, Interstate 30 and East Grand Avenue, the Jubilee Park area was home to more than 1,600 mostly low-income residents in 2000.

That year, 60 percent of the residents were Hispanic and 35 percent African-American. But "it's way more [Hispanic] now," said Ana Maria Narro, executive director of the non-profit Jubilee Park Project, the driving force behind the neighborhood's privately funded after-school, literacy and community revitalization programs.

The project's office and activity center mark the entry to Jubilee Park, the neighborhood's centerpiece, built after the purchase and removal of more than 50 substandard homes less than a decade ago.

Across the park stands a school the project built and leases to Head Start of Dallas. Six blocks away, the Dallas school district's O.M. Roberts Elementary rises above East Grand.

Along Grand and the area's other commercial streets, businesses offer cars, car parts, car repairs and car washes. Others sell insurance or signs or metal or Mexican food. Liquor stores and clubs dot the area. Women standing in front of a worn-out apartment complex on Ann Street sometimes wave and beckon to passers-by.

This pocket of Dallas was first subdivided for residential development in the late 19th century. Today the neighborhood's mostly well-kept streets pass some 200 vacant lots and a mix of structures in varying stages of care or wear, many with fenced front yards. New houses sport brick, older ones present varying colors of wood or metal siding – some with boarded doors and windows. Humble apartments and churches are scattered here and there.



JIM MAHONEY / DMN
Jason Loftis relaxes in a barber's chair as Kenneth Anglin finishes up a shave and a haircut at Kenneth's Barber Shop in Jubilee Park. Mr. Anglin gave Mr. Loftis his first haircut 35 years ago.

Utility pole banners welcome visitors. Unpaved, tree-canopied alleys offer a small-town feel. The roar of traffic on I-30 breaks that spell.

Drive the streets and read the words D.D. McDonald spray-painted on his sheet-metal shed: Keep Out Dope Head. ... Keep Out God Is Watching.



JAMES A. BLACK/Staff Artist

Talk with long-time residents and hear about the area's years as a mostly white, working-class neighborhood convenient to the Ford assembly plant on Grand Avenue.

Hear how the area for years had its share of crime and fighting and how Grand offered a plentiful array of shops and services back when it was a main route into and out of Dallas. Hear how I-30 opened through the area in the early 1960s, pulling traffic and shoppers off Grand and isolating the neighborhood. Hear how family homes became rental property, how the Ford plant's closing in 1970 took jobs, how school desegregation sent most of the last white families to the suburbs.

And hear how the neighborhood kept going down until it got really rough and crime-ridden about 25 years ago.

Rough times

"I've seen a whole lot happen, a whole lot of kids die," said Alfonzo Hall, owner of an auto-body shop on Grand Avenue for the past 22 years. "I can recall a time when every Friday for about six weeks a young man got killed somewhere in the community."

Benny Tovar, assistant manager at Vickery Wholesale Greenhouse, recalls "a lot of fighting, drug-dealing, shooting, killing, prostitution" in the neighborhood where he grew up.

So do Don Kemp Sr. and Jr., whose family sheet metal business has held a corner at Carroll and Haskell avenues since 1938.

"Back in the '80s and early '90s this was crack central," said Don Jr., who figures his neck of the woods

would have been business central if the Dallas Cowboys had built a stadium, as proposed, at nearby Fair Park.

"If Jerry Jones had come to the Cotton Bowl, me and Daddy would be in Tahiti where the women don't wear tops," he said, laughing.

Talk to residents, hear glowing and critical reviews of the seven video surveillance cameras that Dallas police installed in the neighborhood three months ago.

"Those cameras have done a great thing for security," said Mr. Hall, adding he doesn't have to spend as much time guarding his shop. "I've got a good dog. I've got a pit bull. Hercules. He's a killer," he said, smiling.

The cameras have indeed reduced gang activity and street crime, but at a personal cost, said Drika Smith, whose family lives in a line of houses on the single-lane Congo Street.

"You can't stand outside on the corner without being harassed by the police," said the Mesquite resident. "This is where we grew up. Everybody don't sell drugs."

Paid for in large part with Jubilee Project funds, the cameras have supported an anti-crime task force working the area. And they have encouraged residents to report incidents and suspicious behavior, said police Lt. David Pughes, of the southeast patrol division.

Whatever the reasons, reported offenses in the 62-block area are down 10 percent for the last three months, he said. Total offenses in the neighborhood have declined each of the last three years as well, but crime remains a concern.

The area's 253 offenses last year included two homicides, 38 aggravated assaults and 27 robberies.

Still, residents and investors in the area speak positively of the future, of Mr. Pickens' gift and the coming Jubilee projects.

"It's going to bring stability, safety and people to the area," said Jon Bender, a homebuilder from Frisco who is buying and clearing lots and constructing homes on a stretch of Fletcher Street next to Fair Park.

"This is what we've been waiting for. We need this," said Mr. Tovar. "It should have happened 20 years ago."

Making changes

Ten years ago, members of St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church, near the Park Cities, were considering ways to celebrate the congregation's 50th anniversary.

In 1997, church leaders decided that instead of expanding their building, they would help a struggling neighborhood. And they asked church member and civic leader Walt Humann to take the lead.

Conversations with city officials and representatives of the Greater Dallas Community of Churches, Habitat for Humanity and other groups pointed church leaders to the decaying, crime-infested area north of Fair Park. And on Bank Street, the church used \$200,000 in donations to build two houses for a program center, calling it Jubilee.

Mr. Humann recalls the time he drove past two young men sitting on a porch on Congo Street, bouncing a basketball. "I asked them why they weren't playing ball in a park, and they said, 'We don't have a park.' "

Residents and PTA members at the nearby Brown Elementary had been talking about the need for a community park as well. The church approached a private foundation, which provided about \$300,000 to buy and demolish 50 ruined homes – making room for what residents named Jubilee Park.

Church members, foundations, other private donors and volunteers have kept the ball rolling, contributing countless hours and about \$5 million toward Jubilee programs and services, such as housing repairs, crime prevention, park upkeep and staff salaries.

That money doesn't include Mr. Pickens' donation – scored by Mr. Humann, the Jubilee Project chairman, from his long-time friend. "He said I've got a deal you can't pass up. It's called Jubilee Park," Mr. Pickens recalled Wednesday when residents and government officials gathered in the neighborhood to celebrate his gift.

He, Mr. Humann and Mayor Tom Leppert say they believe the Jubilee Project can be a model for cooperative redevelopment projects elsewhere in the city.

They hope the new buildings (targeted for opening in 2009) and expanded services at Jubilee Park will be the latest catalyst for renewal in a neighborhood that will inevitably change – one awaiting the arrival of a DART rail line nearby and a new life for the old Ford plant.

A privately funded development plan lays out ideas and strategies. And ideally, the Pickens infusion will spur further donations, business investment, construction of affordable housing and attract badly needed volunteers, Mr. Humann said.

"The residents in this community have a right and we have an obligation to help them attain part of the American dream," he told the crowd Wednesday.

They stood before an abandoned building, a former bar that had spilled trouble across the neighborhood for years.

The Jubilee Project bought the building earlier this year, and a bulldozer waited to take it down, to make way for the new government resource center.

"I wouldn't have missed this for the world," said Kathleen Burnett, a longtime resident of the area.

Minutes before the bulldozer roared to life, Mr. Pickens challenged Ms. Burnett and her neighbors.

"I'm convinced this is something that's going to grow, and it's going to look much different here," he said.

"But know this, it's going to be you that are going to have to do it. Money helps, but the people have to make it happen."