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CHRIS TORRES



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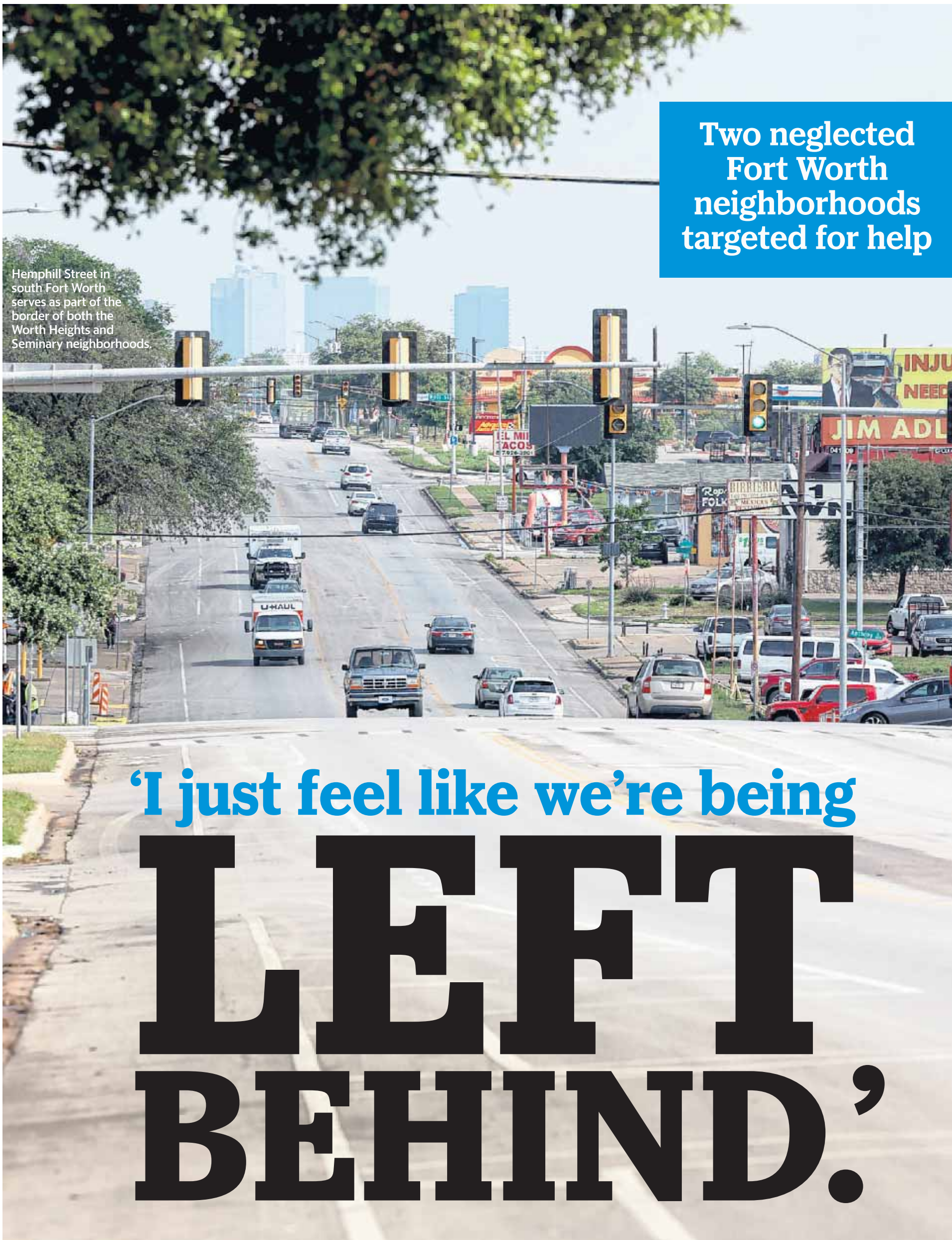


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# Fort Worth Star-Telegram

## SUNDAY



Hemphill Street in south Fort Worth serves as part of the border of both the Worth Heights and Seminary neighborhoods.

Two neglected Fort Worth neighborhoods targeted for help

**'I just feel like we're being LEFT BEHIND.'**

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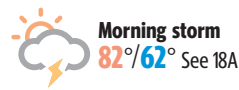


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A Worth Heights Neighborhood Association sign sits atop the street sign at the intersection of South Jones Street and East Biddison Street in Worth Heights.

# Shared history. Shared problems.

## \$8 million allocated for Worth Heights, Seminary

Yesenia Martinez grew up in Worth Heights, south of downtown Fort Worth, not far from La Gran Plaza.

She lived with her parents on South Grove Street, which is less than a mile from Worth Heights Elementary School. She remembers how her third grade teacher would walk with students to Worth Heights Park, about two blocks away, to play. Children played outside in the neighborhood, too, and she felt safe walking to her friend's house.

Her grandparents and other family members still live in Worth Heights. Her grandparents have been in the

BY KAMAL MORGAN  
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same home for more than 30 years.

Martinez, 36, now lives in the Seminary neighborhood, just south of Worth Heights, with her husband and 1-year-old daughter. She works at Metroplex Services, an insurance agency that specializes in commercial clothing designs, on Hemphill Street.

Worth Heights and Seminary have deteriorated since her childhood, she said.

There is more traffic on Hemphill Street, which runs north and south through the neighborhoods, she said, and she doesn't feel as safe. She sees more trash and people experiencing homelessness and fewer businesses. Martinez said the city has not done its part to maintain the neighborhoods.

"I just feel like we're being left behind," Martinez said.

Now, though, there is reason for hope. Seminary and Worth Heights were chosen by the City Council last year to share in an \$8 million in-

SEE SHARED, 4A



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Laura Rios, 67, was born and raised in Worth Heights, located west of I-35W. Rios remembers when, in the 1950s, the community was peaceful and the people took pride in their neighborhood. Now, she feels as if her neighborhood has been neglected. Rios hopes this will change as the Seminary and Worth Heights neighborhoods were chosen by the City Council last year to share in an \$8 million Neighborhood Improvement Program.



**1,795**  
households between the Seminary and Worth Heights neighborhoods

**90 TO 95%**  
of the population in those neighborhoods is Hispanic

**\$40,625**  
The median household income in Worth Heights

**\$48,292**  
The median household income in Seminary

**\$72,726**  
The median income for all of Fort Worth



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A freight train rolls past the abandoned grain silos that tower over the suburban neighborhood of Worth Heights. Residents say the silos and grain elevator on the site are an eyesore and a danger that should be torn down.



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A sidewalk abruptly stops on a block of Kellis Street in the Seminary neighborhood of Fort Worth.

FROM PAGE 3A

## SHARED

vestment through the Neighborhood Improvement Program.

The program is administered by the Neighborhood Services Department, with a mission to improve the quality of life and safety for people in the neighborhoods. Residents will have a say in how the money is spent, but the program typically includes more police presence, community interaction with governmental and nongovernmental organizations, installation of security cameras, new sidewalks, new streetlights and more.

The improvement program has already been used in Como, Stop Six and on the north side. These neighborhoods saw decreased crime rates and an increase in new home construction after investment through the Neighborhood Improvement Program, according to a city presentation.

### SIMILAR PAST AND PROBLEMS

Worth Heights and Seminary share a similar history and face similar challenges today.

Local historian Richard Gonzales, a member of Worth Heights Neighborhood Association, said the area around the neighborhoods was farmland in the late 1800s and into the 1900s. An abandoned concrete grain silo and grain elevator complex along railroad tracks in Worth Heights is a testament to when Fort Worth was a grain capital of the Southwest. Today, the complex is considered an eyesore and safety hazard by Worth Heights residents.

During the early 20th century,

**\$107,508**

The median home value in Worth Heights

**\$115,366**

The median home value in Seminary

**\$275,293**

The median home value in Fort Worth as a whole

Gonzales said, the neighborhoods became home to people who worked at nearby steel mills, which recruited Mexican workers when unionized white employees went on strike. The neighborhoods also became popular with people displaced by the Mexican revolution from 1910 to 1920, he said.

In the '50s and '60s, the area was still dominated by farmland, where people had cattle and goats and grew their own food, Gonzales said. There were white and Latino residents, though white flight took hold, and the Mexican population grew, he said.

Today, there are more than 1,795 households between the two neighborhoods, where the population is 90 percent to 95 percent Hispanic. The median household income is \$40,625 in Worth Heights and \$48,292 in Seminary, well below the median for all of Fort Worth, which is \$72,726.

The median home value is \$107,508 in Worth Heights and \$115,366 in Seminary, both far less

than the median of \$275,293 for Fort Worth as a whole.

Drive down Hemphill and you'll see barbershops, salons, car lots, insurance companies, and taco restaurants along the street. Turn onto West Beddell Street and you'll see the clutter of broken chairs, laundry hampers, and bedroom dressers in front of homes. A home flying a Mexico flag is next to another flying an American flag.

On the other side of West Beddell, two-story homes with clean driveways and well-kept exterior paint are next to one-story shotgun homes with dirt driveways and peeling paint.

### A FEELING OF NEGLECT

Laura Rios, 67, was born and raised in Worth Heights and remembers the neighborhood as safe, close knit, peaceful and loving. Residents had pride in the neighborhood, she said.

Worth Heights is bounded by Hemphill Street on the west, West Biddison Street on the north, I-35W on the east and West Seminary Drive on the south.

Rios' parents moved from Waco to Worth Heights in the early '50s. Her father was in the military, and her mother was a housewife. Her father bought a home on Jones Street close to the elementary school. The roads were dirt then, and there were few houses on their street.

She reminisces about a neighbor across the street who had chickens and grew corn on his farm. She and other children would run through the farm until they were chased off by the owner. A creek ran through the neighborhood from South Freeway

SEE SHARED, 5A



FROM PAGE 4A

## SHARED

that hindered children from going to school when it flooded until it was fixed years later, Rios says.

Rios has been married for 45 years and raised two children in Worth Heights on South Jones Street. She says the neighborhood has everything she needs, from restaurants, to grocery stores, like Supermercados Telo-loapan #14 and Fiesta, to churches. Rios says older residents are close and help each other with transportation.

But Rios has seen a shift, as younger residents don't seem to have the same pride in the neighborhood and don't maintain their properties as well, she said.

She is active in the Worth Heights Neighborhood Association and serves as its treasurer. The association has been instrumental in lobbying for traffic lights, stop signs, and sidewalks and hosts health fairs. The association has advocated new housing and wants the Seminary South Branch Library reopened in the community.

Rios said she and the association hope the Neighborhood Improvement Program will bring better roads and sidewalks; more stop signs and streetlights; and beautification of the neighborhoods. They'd also like a better relationship with the Code Enforcement Department and a better police presence.

She feels her neighborhood has been neglected but is hopeful about the improvement program.

"This neighborhood needs a lot of love and care," Rios says.

Representatives of the city met with the Worth Heights Neighborhood Association on Jan. 6, Feb. 12 and April 27 to get input for the improvement project.

Councilwoman Jeannette Martinez, who represents Worth Heights, says she wants to improve the roads, sidewalks, and lighting and anything else the neighborhood wants, within budget constraints.

"I want the neighborhood to voice their different wants and needs, and we can work towards those," Martinez said. "Of course I want the infrastructure to be good, and I want to be able to say that the city of Fort Worth is taking care of residents and its assets too."

### 'WE SEE IT DETERIORATING'

Yesenia Martinez, who grew up in Worth Heights and now lives in Seminary, says she plans to stay in the area as long as she can. She enjoys the businesses in the area, from the Mexican restaurants to the businesses at La Gran Plaza. Many of the



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Worth Heights Elementary School is located at East Butler Street and South Jones Street. Members of the Worth Heights Neighborhood Association have expressed concern for the safety of the students who occasionally walk to the nearby park with a lack of sidewalks in the area.

people she knows, like herself, have stayed in the area because it is the only home they know.

She said she has seen other neighborhoods in Fort Worth, such as those on the north side, be redeveloped while the Seminary neighborhood has felt neglected. She worries about business break-ins and other crime and is unhappy with the level of police presence.

"My grandparents have been in the same house for over 30 years, and that's where I grew up, and most of my family is still in the neighborhood," Martinez said. "And it's still hard for us because it wasn't like this before, and we see it deteriorating."

Martinez would like to see more cameras installed for crime prevention, the removal of bike lanes on Hemphill Street because of the lack of cyclists and parking, and more done to control trash and litter.

Councilwoman Elizabeth Beck, who represents Seminary, agrees the neighborhood has been overlooked and wants to improve the area.

Seminary is bounded by James Avenue on the west, West Seminary Drive on the north, I-35W on the east and I-20 and Greenbriar Park to the south.

Seminary does not have a neighborhood association, which Beck said could advocate for its needs, provide a framework for social events and guide the Neighborhood Improvement Program. The city had a community meeting in Seminary on April 20 at Greenbriar Community Center to get input for the improvement program, she said.

"It's going to be a lot of boots on the ground to make sure that we're engaging with our residents," Beck said. "And what my hope is, and my goal is to do

all of those physical improvements, but to identify leaders and help facilitate them reestablishing their neighborhoods."

### NEIGHBORHOODS SELECTED BASED ON HARDSHIP

Areas are chosen for the Neighborhood Improvement Program based on categories such as financial hardship of residents, the number of housing cost burdened households, educational attainment, and the condition of the neighborhood, which takes in safety, infrastructure, environmental issues and the condition of housing.

The program was introduced in 2017 in the Stop 6 neighborhood, which had \$2.56 million allocated for improvements. More than 300 streetlights were improved or added, 40 police cameras were installed, 180 tons of litter and dumping were cleaned up, and 17,688 linear feet of sidewalks were added, among other neighborhood improvements.

The entire process takes a few years to complete, and there are still neighborhoods included in the program that have money left to be spent.

The program includes multiple phases. The planning phase involves community engagement to identify areas of concern. The next phase includes work on projects identified by residents to do such things as improve parks, community centers, libraries and beautify the neighborhood. Remaining funding will be put toward major projects such as roads, sidewalks and streetlights.

Worth Heights and Seminary are in the community engagement phase, which takes about a year to 18 months. Afterward, work on the projects, based on

community input, will begin.

### 'NEVER, EVER TURN OUR BACK'

Richard Gonzales spent many years researching and using the resources at the former Seminary South Branch Library, now the Fort Worth History Center, in Worth Heights, and his wife grew up in the area attending Worth Heights Elementary School. He says everyone is entitled to a nice home and improvements in the area that raise the quality of life.

He is cautious about the area being redeveloped, which could displace current residents. He points to the Neighborhood Conservation Plan and Housing Affordability Strategy, a city report that includes a road map to add affordable housing and prevent displacement of residents, mainly in Black and Hispanic neighborhoods.

He is relieved the Neighborhood Improvement Program will repair potholes, roads, and sidewalks, and bring much needed resources to these Hispanic neighborhoods.

They are neighborhoods with a continual flow of Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants looking for economic opportunities and who gravitate toward those with familiar cultural backgrounds, Gonzales says.

"Doesn't matter your level of income, all people — rich, white, poor, Black, whatever — are important," Gonzales said. "You have people living there, therefore, we should never, ever turn our back or neglect wherever people are living."

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There are no sidewalks along East Suart Drive in Worth Heights.