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From the Los Angeles Times

PRIMARY SOURCE

The battle of Boyle Heights

East L.A. Community Corp. on gentrification's next front

October 25, 2007

Maria Cabildo and Evangeline Ordaz-Molina, president and vice-president, respectively, of the **East L.A. Community Corporation**, visited the editorial board this week to discuss their group's work in Boyle Heights and Unincorporated East Los Angeles. The area is attracting considerable developer interest, with hotly debated projects in the works for the **Sears Town Center** at Soto St. and Olympic Blvd. and many sites along the Gold Line corridor, among others. Here's a portion of our conversation:

Evangeline Ordaz-Molina: There is a developer in escrow to buy the Sears property. We thought it was a complete deal because there was all this press around it. Um, but uh, in the research we've done they're not actually the owners yet, and actually talking to somebody in their office, based on that, they're not the owners yet. So that's the status; they're still trying to acquire it.

Jim Newton: It is just a vacant piece of property at this point?

Maria Cabildo: No, it has a fully operating Sears store.

Evangeline Ordaz-Molina: It's not the distribution center anymore.

Robert Greene: It's a fully operating Sears?

Maria Cabildo: What's also interesting about that Sears is it's the only, it has the only bookstore in Boyle Heights.

Jim Newton: Is that right?

Maria Cabildo: In the basement there's a little place where they sell books.

Robert Greene: That's the only bookstore in Boyle Heights?

Maria Cabildo: Yeah, there's not a bookstore in Boyle Heights. You need to go, like to Montebello, or come downtown. There's not a place where — you know, I go to the thrift store that's really close, but there's no bookstore.

Robert Greene: Well next to the Starbucks next year we'll have a Borders or a Barnes & Noble...

Evangeline Ordaz-Molina: Well that's what they're talking about!

Maria Cabildo: Seriously. That's the MTA. The folks on the ground, that's their vision for **Mariachi Plaza**. To bring in like a Barnes & Noble or a Borders. Right there at First and Boyle.

Robert Greene: And, we talk about this a lot but I want you to sort of articulate it for me. What's wrong with that?

Evangeline Ordaz-Molina: It would be OK, if let's say, it doesn't interfere with the mariachis who hang out on Mariachi Plaza and wait for work.

Robert Greene: Because that's the distinctive character of the...

Evangeline Ordaz-Molina: Exactly. Because the worst thing that could happen would be a Mariachi Plaza with no Mariachis. Which would just be a repeat of what happened at Olvera Street. And so that's part of what prompted us to **buy the Boyle Hotel**, or the Mariachi Hotel as people call it in the neighborhood, is that: to try to preserve some affordable housing for those mariachis so that they stay on that plaza — which they made, they created. That was a traffic island with a donut shop. And they started hanging out there, and then that's when they brought in that kiosk, which now unfortunately doesn't serve much function except to look pretty to people driving by.

Maria Cabildo: And it has no acoustics.

Evangeline Ordaz-Molina: You can't play in there, yeah.

Jim Newton: But there's nothing about a, uh, a Barnes & Noble that's inherently anti-mariachi.

Evangeline Ordaz-Molina: Well, except that the things that, the things that end up happening around a development like that, like controlled parking, no loitering, you know, those are the things that will drive them away. Like their big issues now are: We need to be sure that there's still parking for us, so when a job opportunity comes up, we can jump in our van and you know, and go. And then, we need, also with a development like that we need affordable housing. Housing around that area is no longer affordable, they can no longer afford to live right there. Because often what happens is one guy will go and hang out on the plaza. And other guys in their houses, all within walking distance of the plaza, and they get a job, and they call each other and they have to descend to jump in the van and go. So, you know, so, it's just all the things that are threatening to drive that culture out. And then also will drive out the people who hire them. I

mean, you know, you and I don't really hire them. If I want to get a mariachi, you know, I call somebody. I don't drive up and haggle for the cheapest price, and you know. But all the people who hire them are, you know, the low-income, working people in that community. And if they're gone, the mariachis will have to follow them to Riverside or Texas or wherever — if that's, if possible.

Maria Cabildo: And I guess, um. I'm not as, um, I think it's a bad thing. I think, you know, I'd like to see a Martinez Books or something...

Jim Newton: A local...

Maria Cabildo: Yeah. But it's, you know I was just in Mexico and I brought her a souvenir. And the souvenir was a Starbucks cup with Mexico City on it. And it was like this very, it was like every neighborhood looks the same now. I mean, actually every neighborhood is looking the same. I mean I was just at Harvard Square, and it used to be kind of a cool place where you could go and hang out, and there was like this little counter where you could have a cheap breakfast. And now it's just Papyrus and Urban Outfitters. And I feel like all our great spaces are disappearing, and they all look exactly the same. And I think that's a real tragedy. I was kidding around with somebody. I was at the Old North Church when I was in Boston. And the sign that was put on the Old North Church was dated 1924, and I said to one of my colleagues you know that sign is older than, you know, 95% of Los Angeles. Just the sign. And here's Boyle Heights, one of the oldest neighborhoods in the city of L.A., and it's got these really great features like the Boyle Hotel and the commercial corridors on Cesar Chavez and on First Street, and I really feel like we should be working to preserve those spaces instead of putting all our investment into creating new stuff. And I feel like the city, there hasn't been a real effort to build up the capacity of the businesses on the commercial corridor. And I wish there was energy around that, helping them grow their businesses so they can be more successful and hire more people, versus, kind of banking on Borders to somehow lift this whole neighborhood.

Tim Cavanaugh: What kind of response do you get from, from homeowners, local homeowners?

Maria Cabildo: Well, since we're 25% homeowner and 75% renter, you know, so we don't see a whole bunch of them... But in terms of responses from community residents, from homeowners around the retail issue, I think a lot of the homeowners that we've talked to at all, have moved into Boyle Heights or stayed in Boyle Heights because they like it as uh, kind of the way it is. I think there are definitely homeowners in the area that would like to see something different, that would like, like Montebello or Pasadena in Boyle Heights. But a lot of folks that we've been talking to like that it's you know: You can go down to Cesar Chavez and buy raspados and you can find churros, and you know...

Jim Newton: At the same time I suspect there are people who'd like it to be more convenient to buy a book...

Maria Cabildo: Mm-hmm.

Jim Newton: ...so there must be some tension in all that.

Evangeline Ordaz-Molina: I think so.

Maria Cabildo: I mean we want that as well. I mean how can you encourage literacy when a parent can't find, has to go all the way to Montebello, and they're transit dependent, to buy books for their kids? I mean it's... In our visioning for the Boyle Hotel, we've had these conversations with residents about their vision for the Boyle Hotel, and a bookstore did come up as something.

Evangeline Ordaz-Molina: And a café...

Jim Newton: But not Starbucks.

Evangeline Ordaz-Molina: Right, specifically, they'll say café and then their next line will be "but not Starbucks."

Robert Greene: When you go to East L.A. — let me rephrase that — when I go to East L.A., um, and see the new drive-through Starbucks there, which we've talked about, and the new Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf, which is just further on, in what is essence a mini-mall, and it does begin to look like every other neighborhood, and you talk to people about it, um, at least the people that I've, many of the people that I've spoken with, have said "This is great. Now all we need is a Rite-Aid." And they mean it. Um, because that's evidence of their neighborhood now being able to attract things that other neighborhoods couldn't. And I understand the heartbreak in that, especially since I'm not from there and I like to see places that are picturesque. That doesn't mean I would necessarily want to live their without those accoutre— I live in Highland Park, as we discussed, and we don't have a Starbucks either. So, so how do you, I realize this is a conversation we've had a lot, but how do you respond to that? What do you, what do you do to assure that there are the amenities that people want while retaining the character of the neighborhood, given what you said: that once gentrification starts, it doesn't stop till it's done?

Maria Cabildo: Mm-hmm.

Robert Greene: I didn't mean to ask that just to depress you.

Maria Cabildo: I know! I know! And it's something that we think about a lot, and we don't necessarily have the answers to. I mean it's really tough. I mean, one of the things, having grown up in this neighborhood, and I still work there, I mean there are some things that I pay more for in Boyle Heights than if I just drove to Montebello to pick up. So I can see the value of some of these convenience stores coming in and creating access to a cheaper-priced good. Uh, but I'm afraid that when that happens, that same person that would have benefited from that cheaper-priced good isn't going to be living there at all. So it doesn't really matter. Cause they're not going to be there to take advantage of that.

Jim Newton: They get sort of rolled out of the way?

Maria Cabildo: Yeah, so the work that we do, I mean like looking at Sears, Sears is really an

exciting project to me. I mean I see it as this real opportunity to maybe go beyond what were some of the agreements on Staples Center, the community benefits agreement, maybe go deeper and have, for example, a balancing of new investment and still respecting the old.

Jim Newton: Is there CRA involvement in the Sears project?

Maria Cabildo: I think that actually they'll be the lead agency. Yeah, I think they are the lead, and they have to coordinate.

Jim Newton: And some subsidy, presumably?

Maria Cabildo: Yeah, I think there are subsidies all around, in Public Works, and, from what I remember it will involve everybody. I mean it's such a large project. It may be the hugest project the city of L.A.'s involved in sort of helping bring to fruition.

Evangeline Ordaz-Molina: So Sears is an example of how we can balance development so that it benefits the community that's there while benefiting the larger region as well.

Maria Cabildo: Right, without necessarily needing to displace them.

Lisa Richardson: What do you want from Sears? What would you like to see?

Maria Cabildo: I'd like to see housing that's permanently affordable. One of the issues that we have is that because the AMI, the affordable housing targeting, keeps rising, I'd like to see deeply affordable housing at Sears. Homeownership opportunities so that we can increase the number of stakeholders, but I'd want those homeownership opportunities to be geared toward people that currently live in Boyle Heights and that have, you know, low incomes. And I would like uh, some kind of component of growing existing businesses on the east side as commercial tenants in the development. And then some type of, definitely the jobs component. So I'd want to have some system in place so that local folks, not just Boyle Heights but you know, just people in the area can benefit from the jobs created during construction. In a real way. You know, I mean everyone talks about, you know setting aside some jobs, but it doesn't really happen because you've got to do work at the ground level to get uh, people to that...

Evangeline Ordaz-Molina: Ready for those jobs.

Maria Cabildo: Ready for those jobs.

Evangeline Ordaz-Molina: They're not qualified for them right now. So it needs, you know, you need to have the training and the job readiness beforehand, before you do them.

Maria Cabildo: I guess I've been thinking more about what don't I want to see. But I'd love, you know, a charter school. I'd love, you know, a connection to the river that was real and that people in the neighborhood actually have access to, I'd love to see recreation opportunity; like we have no open space. And if we do have open space they don't want people playing on it. They don't want recreation, they just want open space where people can just, you know, sit and contemplate.

I mean there's a lot of things we'd like to see, charter schools...

Jim Newton: A lot of children in this area?

Maria Cabildo: There is; the majority of the population is under 18.

Jim Newton: Is that right?

Robert Greene: How is that possible if the majority are longterm renter? Well if I think of a longterm renter I think of a family that's been there since at least before 1978, under rent control. So they've already had kids and the kids have already grown up and moved out. Or are you saying that the kids are staying and having kids?

Maria Cabildo: They're staying.

Evangeline Ordaz-Molina: They're staying.

Lisa Richardson: The houses are very crowded, right?

Maria Cabildo: Yeah, very overcrowded as people are doubling up, even more so.

Lisa Richardson: Is it five people, four people per room?

Maria Cabildo: I think it's like 4.2.

Tim Cavanaugh: Per room?

Maria Cabildo: Mm-hmm.

Tim Cavanaugh: What's the difference between Boyle Heights and South L.A., where people are desperate to get projects coming in that would contain a Borders and a Starbucks and Red Lobster?

Evangeline Ordaz-Molina: I think, well, I think Boyle Heights is — while there's a lot of history in South L.A. — I think Boyle Heights is older and, and has even more history, and kind of more tradition, and like kind of more established commercial corridors. And whereas, like in South L.A., we don't have the problem, like I remember after the uprising, Karen Bass like mapped South L.A., like marked where all the like hour-rate hotels were and marked where all the liquor stores were, and marked— you know and so it was kind of like this, like, she created, or painted like this picture of a wasteland. We don't have that in Boyle Heights. That's not our problem. You know, we do have too, a few too many liquor stores and a few too many like cantinas, but it isn't sort of like that's all there is, where I think...

Maria Cabildo: I think you also have to look at geography. Boyle Heights in terms of like square miles is substantially smaller than South L.A. It's also one of the oldest neighborhoods, most of our housing built before 1970, and it's just, it's a very different environment. And like

Evangeline said, our corridors have been very vibrant, you know, in terms of there hasn't been a lot of, there's always been operating businesses. It hasn't always been the same businesses every year, or every month. I mean there might be turnover in that stall, but there's usually somebody coming in to take over that space. It's always been very vibrant. That's one way it's always been very different.

Evangeline Ordaz-Molina: Right, like you don't get those empty storefronts like you see in South L.A.

Maria Cabildo: Yeah, blocks and blocks of vacant, boarded up buildings.

Evangeline Ordaz-Molina: Yeah, and there's not as much — well there is industrial. But it feels like there's not as much industrial in Boyle Heights. It's more isolated.

Robert Greene: I've gotten you off track, so what are your aims for the area?

Maria Cabildo: I guess the big point for us is Boyle Heights is different from other neighborhoods facing gentrification because of the huge pressures that are created by the public investment.

The other kind of takeaway is that we believe a lot of kind of really good thinking about development is actually happening at the grassroots level. Community residents may not have been, you know, even elementary school graduates or college graduates or high school graduates, but they have really great ideas about what their neighborhood should look like. And we should try to respect that and try to work off of their ideas, versus always looking elsewhere for new ideas about the neighborhood.

And the other is that I think there has to be some kind of intervention, where we can actually, kind of like take a breather and maybe...so our idea is maybe to look at a community land trust for Boyle Heights, the way Figueroa corridor is looking at one, maybe just take a breather. Especially in neighborhoods like the Mariachi Plaza neighborhood. All around the light rail stations, taking a breather on planning. And incorporating the community residents in visioning for them.