

How a coalition put a giant grocer and a community on equal footing

By Jesús de la Torre

The Deco District is a tight-knit community. There are several active neighborhood associations and their various leaders work well together. In fact, in the Spring of 2001 nine neighborhood associations had just completed a community plan that identified problems, solutions and desires for our area. On our wish list was economic development, so a few months later when HEB, the largest grocery store chain in San Antonio, Texas announced that it planned to raze the old neighborhood location and erect a new store we were excited. I was especially happy.

My wife and I had been boycotting the old HEB grocery store because of the long checkout lines, dirty aisles, general poor selection and inconsistent management. We were driving across town to other grocery stores and quite frankly felt rather guilty about the impact our self-righteousness was having on the environment. Once this new HEB was built we could walk to our neighborhood grocery store. Then reality roadblocked us.

The proposed grocery store was just like all the other new stores in the suburbs, big, ugly and made exclusively for cars. But our community is not a suburb. It is an historic inner-city grouping of neighborhoods. Many of our residents live here precisely because it is not a suburb. It's distinctive. The architecture is varied. We are walking distance to a major park, and the grid patterned street design means drivers can choose from a variety routes in and out of the community.

HEB planned to build an enormous box of a store with a black-top parking lot at least twice the size of the old one. The project required tearing down part of the adjacent neighborhood (along with mature trees) and closing a public street. It would increase traffic, add to the already large amount of runoff and be much less approachable for pedestrians. We felt the proposed store was out of touch with the traditional design and human scale of our community.

There was a core group that had worked on the community plan, and after talking to each other about the new grocery store, we realized we had the same concerns about its environmental and sociological impact. Yet, we were conflicted. We knew we needed a new and better grocery store, but we also knew that the one proposed was not best for our community.

What we did next formed the back bone to the negotiations we initiated with HEB.

Like many people facing a tough decision, we made a list. It included all the things we wanted and all the things we did not. We educated ourselves on traditional neighborhood design, met experts to see how other similar communities had integrated grocery stores, consulted with the city's neighborhood planning department and enlisted the help of our elected officials. Once we had a clear idea of what we wanted and why, we approached HEB as a group. It was a strategy that worked for the community and for HEB.

HEB was already getting bad press because of angry neighbors whose homes would end up facing the store's backside. They were loud, but not united and in the end not as successful. Our "coalition" (as our group came to be known) on the other hand, gave HEB an opportunity to deal with one representative group in a structured setting.

We entered into a series of mediated discussions with HEB. The local CDC worked as an impartial mediator and the coalition presented its concerns and proposed solutions to HEB. The coalition decided beforehand what we were willing to give up and what we were not willing to accept.

In the end, we liked the new proposed design of the store. Its definite Deco look was in line with our community plan's objective. We were happy with the generous amount of landscaping that would provide some shade for the parking lot, as well as screen its vastness, and make the store more approachable for pedestrians. The coalition agreed to go along with the construction of a gas station that we had initially opposed, and the street closure to expand the parking lot. Although it was not part of the final agreement (but had been part of the coalition's initial requests), HEB also installed catchment ponds to help reduce the amount of runoff created by the expanded parking lot. HEB even kicked in an extra \$15,000 for the development of a community room in a soon to be renovated retail sector of the Deco District.

The coalition strategy was key to making the agreement palatable. Even though there were never more than 15 people in the room during the negotiations, because we were affiliated with a variety of neighborhood associations, we truly represented a large portion of the community and HEB knew that. The process also made it easier for the coalition to understand HEB's limitations, so accepting some of the things we initially opposed was not as disconcerting. Another very important factor was the coalition's already established working relationship. That made it possible for the coalition to form quickly and accept the fact that although we might not agree with each other 100 percent, we always presented a united front. In the end, we got the improved grocery store that we so badly needed. HEB got to build a store they were comfortable with and even generated some good press. But the best part was that we did not have to sacrifice the community's character.

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