



CULTIVATING TRUSTED PARTNERSHIPS

Healthy Development for a Healthier Community in Houston



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The Urban Land Institute is a global, member-driven organization comprising more than 48,000 real estate and urban development professionals dedicated to advancing the Institute's mission of shaping the future of the built environment for transformative impact in communities worldwide. ULI's interdisciplinary membership represents all aspects of the industry, including developers, property owners, investors, architects, urban planners, public officials, real estate brokers, appraisers, attorneys, engineers, financiers, and academics. Established in 1936, the Institute has a presence in the Americas, Europe, and Asia Pacific regions, with members in 84 countries. More information is available at uli.org. Follow ULI on [X \(formerly known as Twitter\)](#), [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [Instagram](#).

About ULI Houston

ULI Houston brings public- and private-sector leaders together to share and exchange ideas, information, and experiences to shape the way communities grow.

About the Randall Lewis Center for Sustainability in Real Estate

The ULI Randall Lewis Center for Sustainability in Real Estate leads the real estate industry in creating places and buildings where people and the environment thrive. In collaboration with ULI members and partners, the Lewis Center drives industry transformation, cultivates leaders and champions, and helps foster solutions for sustainable, resilient, healthy and equitable cities and communities. The center pursues these goals via cutting-edge research, global convenings, community technical assistance, and other strategies. The center's main programs are Decarbonization, Urban Resilience, and Healthy Places.

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The ULI Houston project team.

About the ULI District Council Partnerships for Health and Racial Equity

Beginning in August 2021, member-led partnerships organized by ULI district councils in British Columbia, Houston, Northwest, St. Louis, and Toronto worked to understand historical inequities and racial discrimination in land use. Working independently and collectively, each team crafted creative strategies to address the ongoing impacts of these inequalities on community health and wealth disparities. Local efforts were part of ULI's District Council Partnerships for Health and Racial Equity, led by ULI's Building Healthy Places Initiative with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. In addition to identifying a local challenge and executing an 18-month scope of work, each team was encouraged to document its project, outcomes, and recommendations, producing a deliverable that would meet the local need. The result is a library of five distinctive reports reflecting the work done in each community. Additionally, a synthesis report and online StoryMap provide a high-level summary of the collective effort and the project overall. More information is available at uli.org/partnerships.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The story of Settegast is the story of Black Houston; the lessons learned apply to other marginalized neighborhoods nationwide.

- Beginning in the 1920s, the settlement of communities in and around Houston was influenced by discriminatory policies and real estate practices that forced Black families to seek refuge in unincorporated areas on Houston's fringe.
- Settegast became a thriving Black community supported by Black businesses and churches, a strong sense of community, and abundant open space. However, racism and systemic neglect by the local government eventually led to a decline in the neighborhood's infrastructure and a loss of many of the features that defined Settegast.
- Sixty years later, investment by the city of Houston in the neighborhood is still limited, but speculative development has begun to creep in, and longtime residents are feeling the impacts on their finances and community cohesion.
- Before significant changes or further harm can occur, ULI Houston and partners engaged with Settegast residents and private, nonprofit, and government partners to understand the effects of historical and current structural inequities on residents today. The conversations about planning and development in Settegast informed a broader plan for change in real estate development—a local Action Agenda for Change in Real Estate.
- While Settegast is unique, the story is not; it is a story that was repeated in towns and cities across the United States, and parts of this Action Agenda for Change in Real Estate apply to other marginalized communities nationwide.



INTRODUCTION

ULI Houston was selected in August 2021 to receive a grant from ULI National’s District Council Partnerships for Health Equity program. Harris County Public Health (HCPH), the Houston Land Bank (HLB), and the Kinder Institute for Urban Research (KIUR) served as key partners for the project, with the HCPH team leading the research and engagement efforts. The Houston project team worked with local partners and community members to develop a community-informed action agenda. The action agenda includes steps ULI Houston, the real estate development community, local organizations, government agencies, and community residents can take to repair historic injustices and advance health and racial equity.

The Houston team focused their planning and engagement efforts on the Settegast neighborhood in Northeast Houston. The team chose to focus on Settegast for several reasons.

- Settegast has a well-documented history of discriminatory building and lending practices.
- Settegast is underplanned and under-resourced compared to other similar Houston neighborhoods.
- Settegast has the lowest life expectancy rate in Harris County, with a nearly 25-year gap compared to the census tract with the longest life expectancy.

- There are many locally unwanted land uses (LULUs) in and around the neighborhood, including two landfills and a large railyard (figure 1).
- The Houston Land Bank, a project partner, owns more than 150 properties in the community, allowing the project to have a more direct and greater impact.

Settegast’s history and development reflect broader historical trends in planning and development that have contributed to inequities in the Houston region today. The themes that emerged from conversations with Settegast residents, local government offices, local organizations, and developers about the neighborhood are unique, yet they bring to light tools that could be applied more broadly in neighborhoods across Houston.

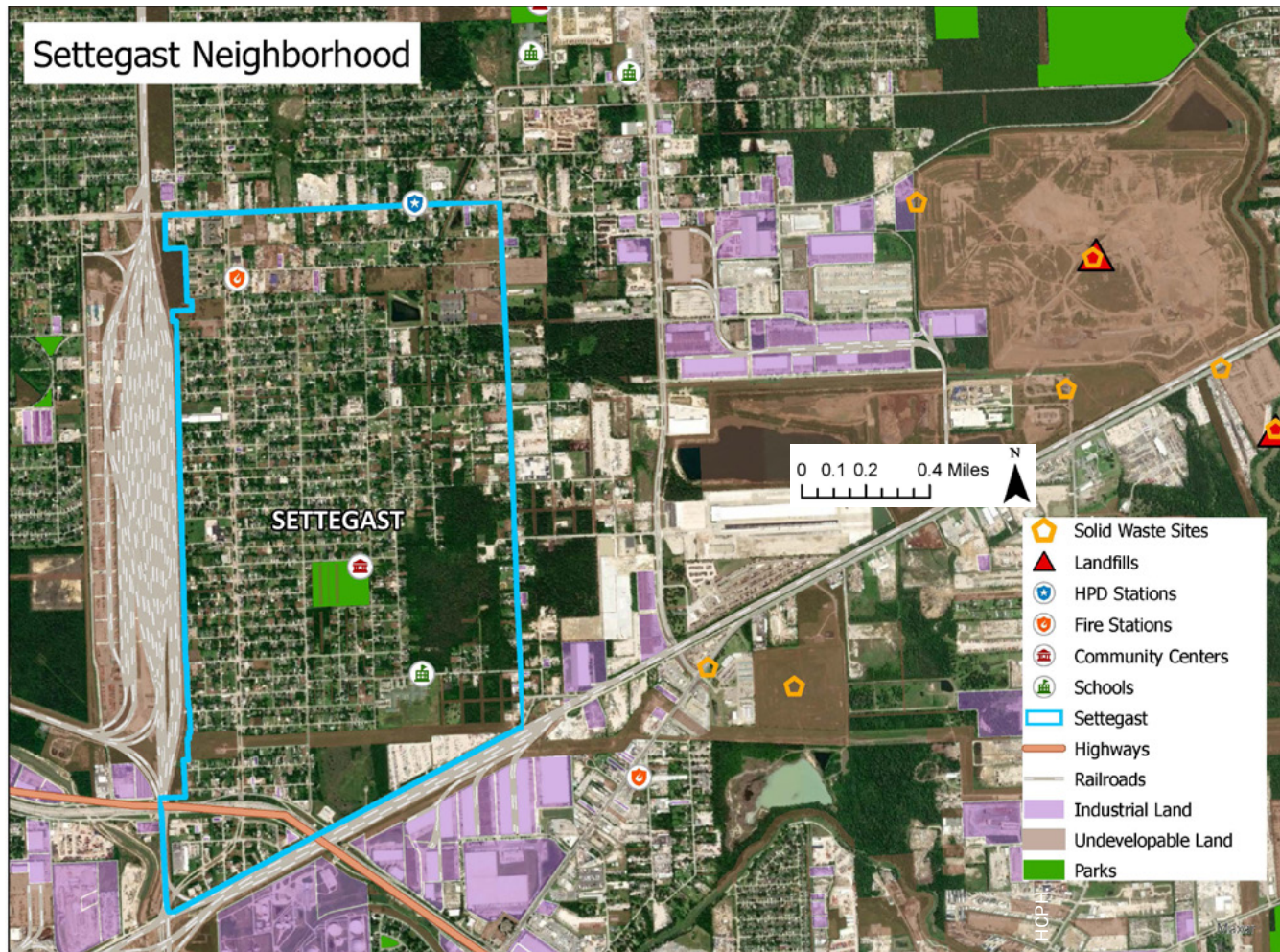


Figure 1. The Settegast neighborhood, select goods and services, and locally unwanted land uses (LULUs).

Historical Context

Beginning in the 1920s, Black Houstonians and Harris County residents were subject to discriminatory practices such as redlining, racially restrictive covenants, and discriminatory lending. These explicitly racist policies prevented Black residents from purchasing homes in most Houston neighborhoods except for the Third Ward, Fifth Ward, and Freedmen's Town. Population growth, overcrowding, and rising rents within these neighborhoods fueled moves to unincorporated communities like Settegast beginning in the early 1940s (figure 2).¹

Settegast was predominantly developed between the 1940s and the 1970s, but it maintained a rural feel with large lots and many open spaces.³ During that time, it became a thriving Black community with local businesses providing many of the goods and services residents needed. Longtime residents of Settegast described the neighborhood as community-oriented and safe, with successful local businesses, homeownership and job opportunities, and a culture of community organizing. It was "a community of families" and "everybody knew everybody."

The culture of the neighborhood stood in stark contrast to the infrastructure conditions. Despite annexation by Houston in 1949, Settegast's streets remained unpaved and unlit. The community lacked drainage, sanitary sewers, and city water until the mid-1960s.^{4,5} Settegast was part of a pattern between 1949 and 1972 where the city annexed neighborhoods of color without addressing basic infrastructure needs.⁴ Instead, tax dollars were funneled to the ever-expanding white suburbs of Houston, further devaluing communities near the city center and continuing the cycle of disinvestment.⁶

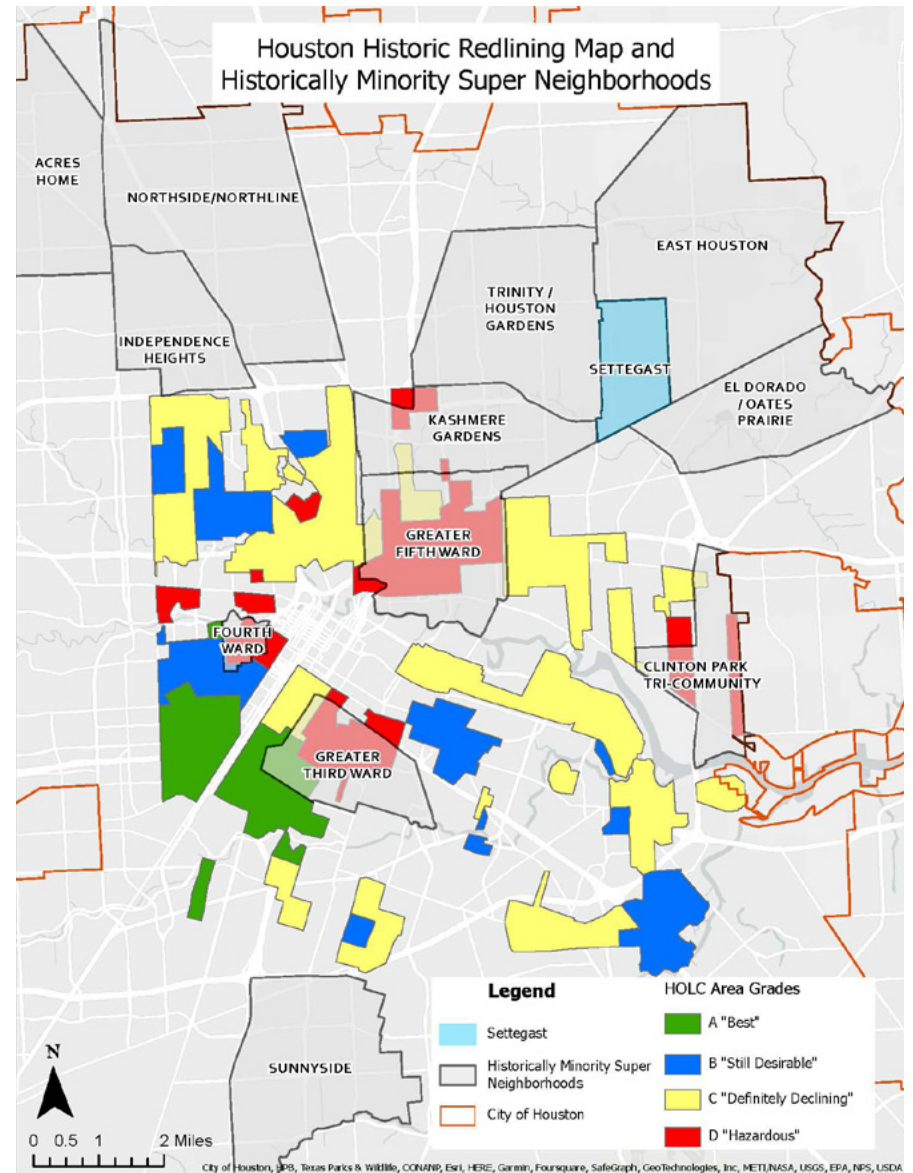


Figure 2. Houston's Historic Redlining Map as developed by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation between 1935 and 1940, overlaid with the historically minority super neighborhoods. (Mapping Inequality.²)

Injustices against Black residents in Settegast were outlined in *The Settegast Report: A Program for Community Development*—a 1966 publication by the Houston–Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization. The report described real estate practices where agents sold homes to Black residents at prices above their estimated value. Many buyers, unaware of the terms, signed a contract for deed to purchase their homes, which made it nearly impossible for buyers to acquire the title to the property due to high interest rates. The term “homeownership” could only be used in the “loosest possible sense” of the word.⁵

Although Black families were able to purchase homes in Settegast, the quality of the homes was often poor. The homes built before annexation were not built to Federal Housing Administration (FHA) minimum quality standards, making those homeowners ineligible for FHA mortgage insurance.⁵ The current housing stock in Settegast predominantly consists of homes built between 1940 and 1979 (figure 3).³ Many of those homes have had minimal upgrades since their development. This is also true of the infrastructure supporting the neighborhood—the drainage infrastructure has seen few upgrades since implementation.⁷

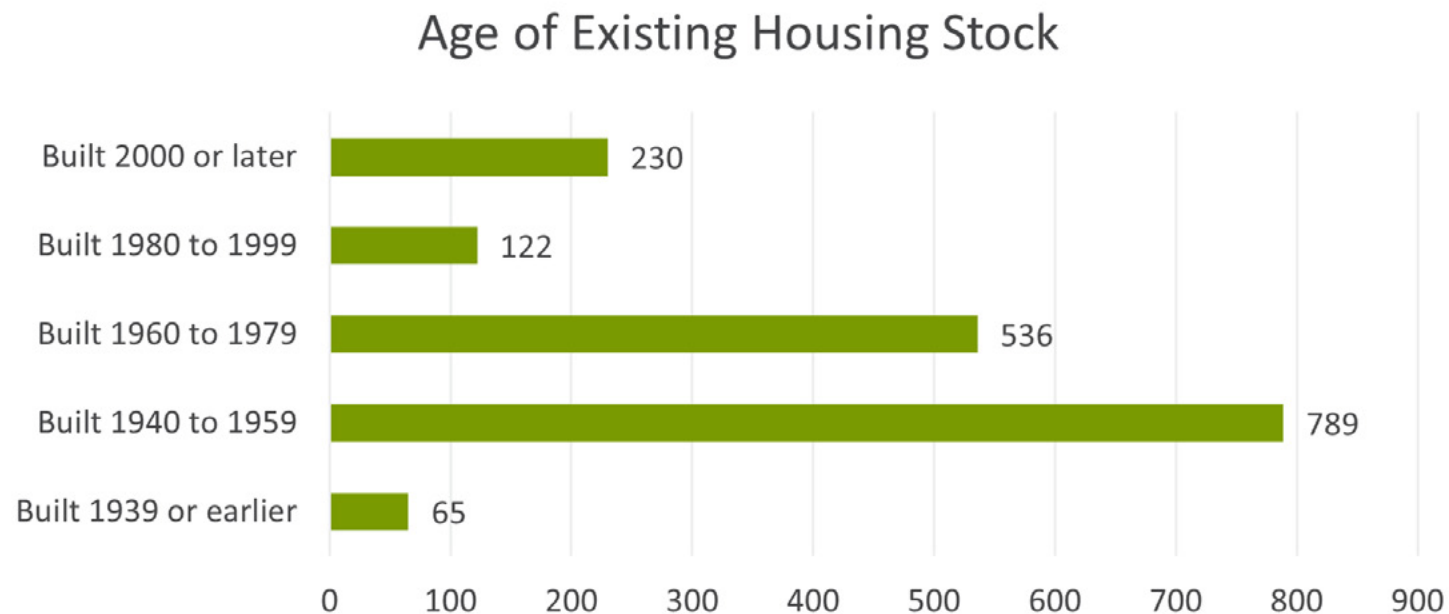


Figure 3. Age of existing housing stock in Settegast.

Source: U.S. Census. 2021. 2016–2020 ACS 5-Year Estimates, Selected Housing Characteristics.³

Discriminatory policies pushed families to settle in Settegast, but after policies enforcing segregation legally ended in the 1960s, many predominantly Black neighborhoods in Houston began to decline. Resources, services, and businesses previously only available to white residents became available to Houston's Black communities. While Black residents began to service formerly white-only businesses, white residents did not do the same with Black businesses. With fewer patrons, the once thriving neighborhood economies supported by churches, services, and businesses serving Black communities began to disappear.⁸ The long-term impacts of disinvestment and discrimination are reflected in the community today.

Enduring Impacts

The racist land use, planning, and development policies and practices that shaped Houston neighborhoods have enduring impacts on environmental, health, and socioeconomic outcomes.

Environmental Impacts

In the absence of zoning, a culture of NIMBYism (not in my backyard) was replaced by one of PIBBYism (place in Black backyards).⁹ Hazardous environmental uses were established throughout Settegast to the detriment of residents' health, well-being, sense of community, connectivity, and property values.

There are two landfills within three miles of Settegast to the east. The McCarty Road Landfill began operations in 1972.¹⁰ The Ralston Road Landfill began operations in 1995, and a significant expansion was permitted in 2017.¹¹ The McCarty Landfill has a history of nuisance odor violations—an unassuming term that fails to convey the seriousness of the potential dangers to human health, including cancers, asthma, and other pulmonary diseases associated with landfills.¹²

Directly to the west, the Union Pacific Rail Yard (Settegast Yard) covers 375 acres with railroad tracks. The rail yard opened in 1950, creating a massive physical barrier between two historically Black neighborhoods—Settegast and Trinity/Houston Gardens.

The lack of zoning combined with Settegast's proximity to the Port of Houston and multiple rail yards has contributed to recent land use changes in the neighborhood. Vacant lots are being repurposed as parking lots for 18-wheelers, scrap yards, and other semi-industrial uses that negatively affect the neighborhood.

Health and Socioeconomic Outcomes

Historical disinvestment in communities across Harris County that are predominantly Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) contributes to the inequitable health outcomes today. This pattern is seen in Settegast. It is the census tract with the lowest life expectancy in Harris County (figure 4). The average life expectancy rate for Settegast residents in 2018 was 65.7 years, or nearly 25 years less than the census tract with the longest life expectancy—Clear Lake City.¹³

LIFE EXPECTANCY IN HARRIS COUNTY

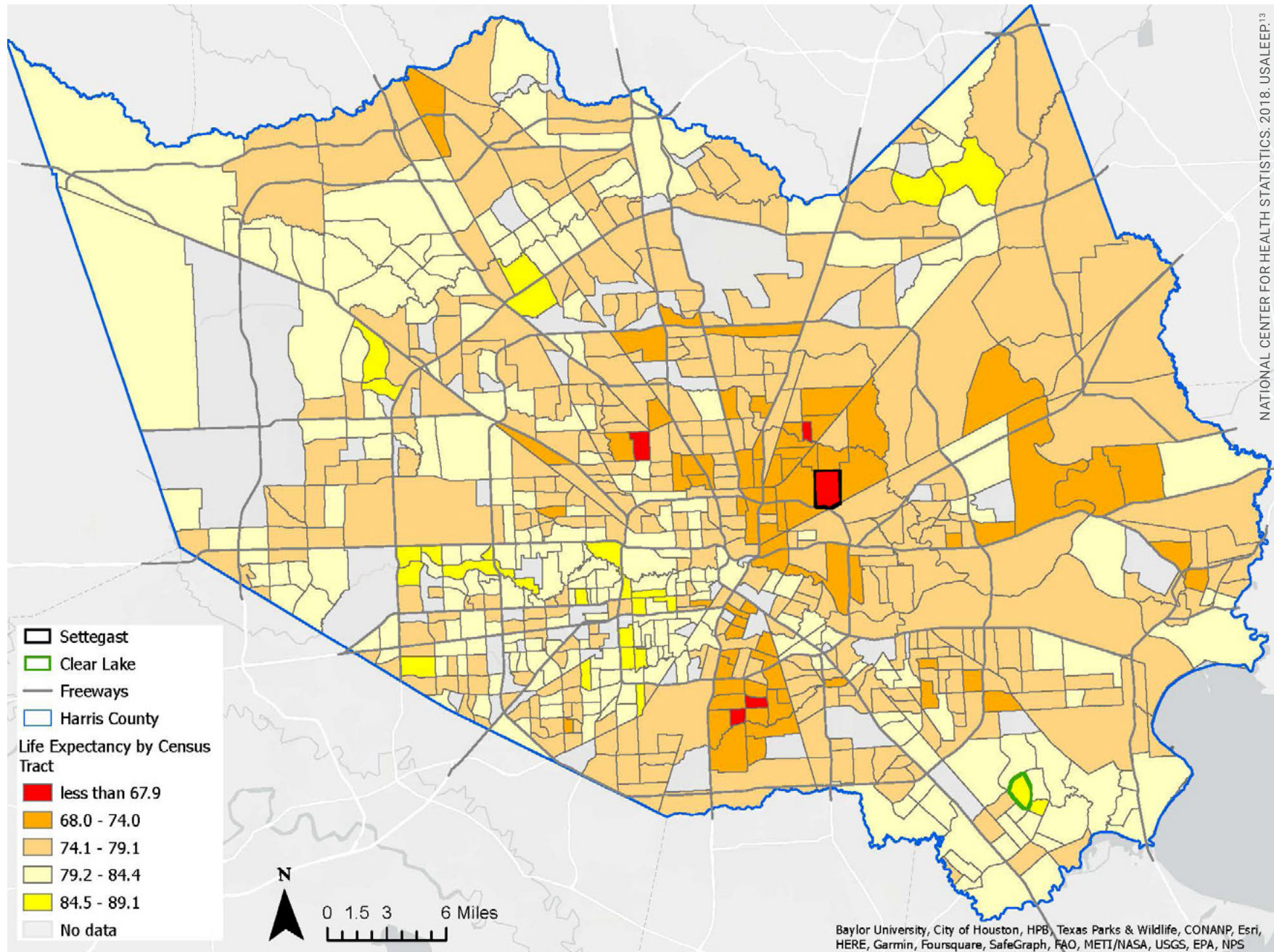


Figure 4. Life expectancy by census tract in Harris County.

Health Conditions Comparison

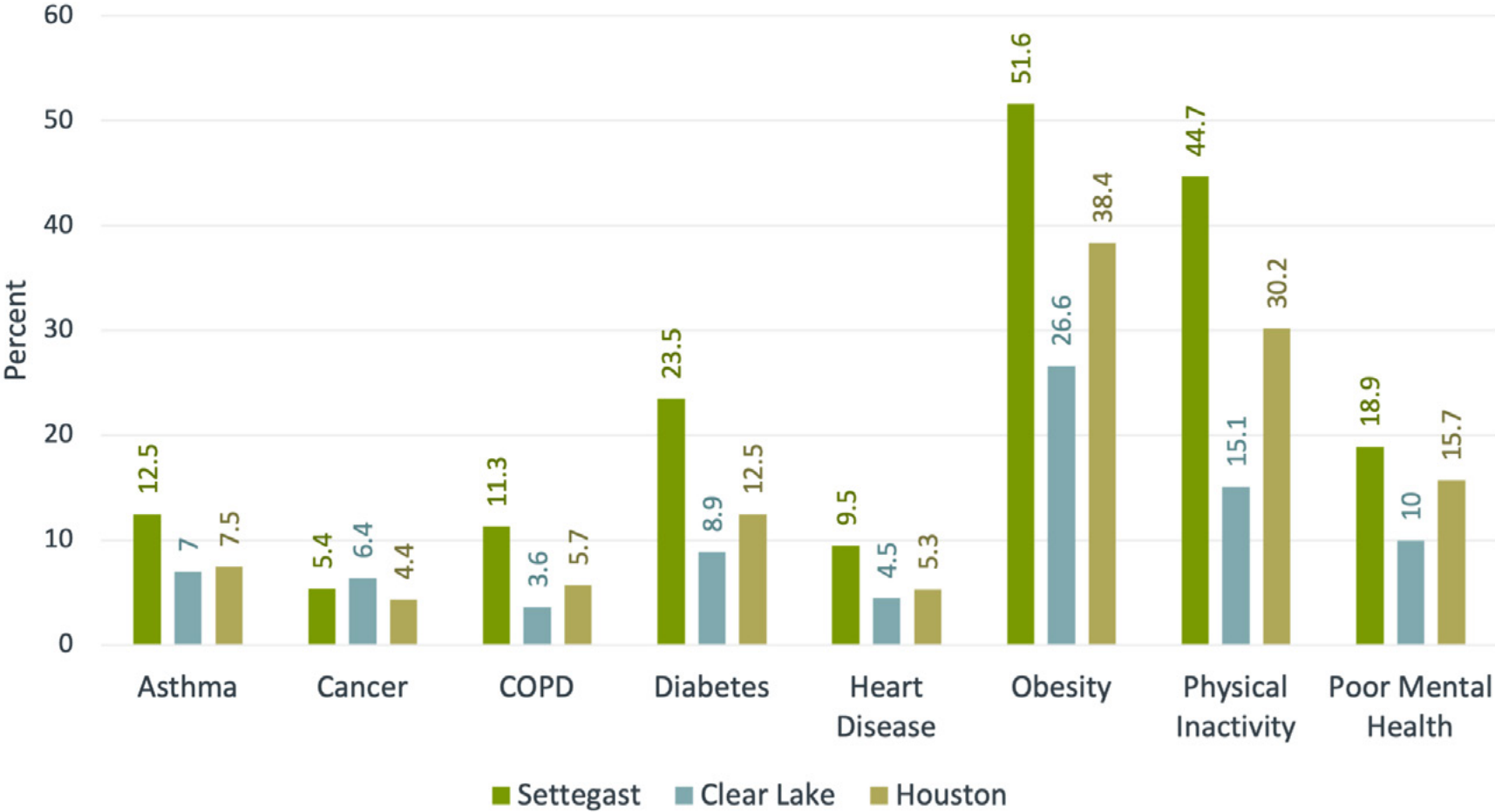


Figure 5. 2019 health outcomes: Settegast compared to Clear Lake and Houston.
 Source: CDC. 2021. PLACES.¹⁴

The contrasting life expectancy rates in Settegast and Clear Lake are similarly reflected in the rates of existing health conditions and health outcomes (figure 5). Higher rates of asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), high blood pressure, obesity, and diabetes in Settegast contribute to the neighborhood’s low life expectancy. Rates of physical inactivity in Settegast are triple those of Clear Lake. Settegast also has higher rates of self-reported poor mental and physical health than Clear Lake and the city of Houston.¹⁴

Health is interconnected with socioeconomic status, including education, employment, and income. Historical disinvestment in communities of color has contributed to limited access to wealth-building opportunities and higher-paying jobs in Northeast Houston. The annual median income in predominantly Black Settegast is \$22,198 compared with the annual median income of \$183,421 in predominantly white Clear Lake (figure 6).¹⁵

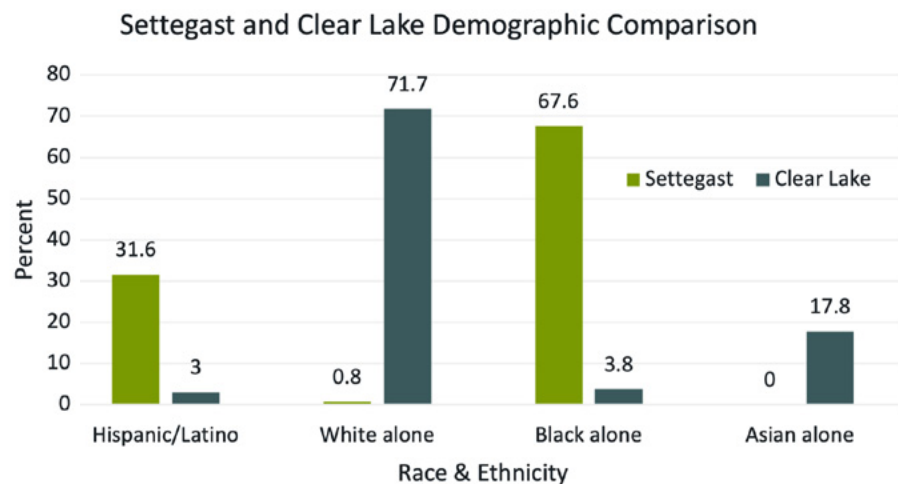


Figure 6. Race and ethnicity comparison between Settegast and Clear Lake.

Source: U.S. Census. 2022. 2017–2021 ACS 5-Year Estimates.¹⁵

Income inequality, as depicted by Settegast and Clear Lake, contributes to increasingly disparate poverty rates, and ultimately disparate health outcomes. Settegast’s poverty rate was 38.6 percent in 2021 compared with a 1.5 percent poverty rate in Clear Lake.¹⁵ Poverty leads to higher rates of exposure to environmental hazards and stress, and lower-income households often have a diminished ability to cope with disease and disability.¹⁶

Settegast residents spoke about the impacts of poverty and disinvestment in the past and present. In the 1960s, poor-quality home construction, a lack of sanitation and water services, and limited access to health care services resulted in poor health outcomes in Settegast. In 2023, some of these issues persist in addition to newer concerns, according to residents. Access to health care services is still limited, as is access to healthy food. Much of the neighborhood’s sidewalk and drainage infrastructure needs repairs to prevent flooding and improve walkability and safety. Increasingly, environmental hazards pose a serious threat to physical and mental well-being.

Intentional investments in infrastructure and services outside BIPOC communities helped initiate a cycle of disinvestment by funneling capital to white communities.⁷ Ailing infrastructure and limited resources in communities like Settegast are still barriers to development and investment in the neighborhood.



PARTNERSHIPS FOR CHANGE

The ULI Houston project team engaged in a series of conversations with local developers, government, organizations, and Settegast residents to better understand the community and the capacity for equitable change through real estate and community development. The team approached the complex and difficult task of confronting local history using three primary methods:

- Researching the history of the Settegast neighborhood and discriminatory policies and practices in greater Houston;
- Engaging with Settegast residents and local organizations; and
- Engaging with ULI members, developers, and local government.

History and Research

HCPH started historical research on Settegast and the greater Houston area to inform the grant application and continued that research throughout the first half of the project. The Houston History Research Center (HHRC) and the African American History Research Center of the Houston Public Library were critically important resources for understanding Settegast's and Houston's histories. The 1966 *Settegast Report*, the foundation of historical research for the project, is housed exclusively at HHRC.

In addition to historical research, qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis were conducted. KIUR played a pivotal role in quantitative data analysis and ground-truthing during Phase 2 of the project. KIUR coordinated and facilitated a community data workshop designed for bi-directional data sharing. The project team presented neighborhood-level data and maps to residents who were able to validate, edit, and add to that data based on their own lived experiences.



Figure 7. A damaged sidewalk forces a woman to run on a narrow road next to 18-wheeler trucks.



Figure 8. A flooded drainage ditch filled with trash in Settegast. The flooding is preventing access to this home.

HCPH conducted an assessment in Settegast to capture existing sidewalk, drainage, and road infrastructure conditions in the community. Using the Infrastructure Assessment Tool (IAT) developed by HCPH, the team was able to validate and document many of the community's concerns about missing or inadequate infrastructure. The IAT is a pedestrian auditing and mapping tool designed for walking street segments to assess and map infrastructure existence, quality, and connectivity. The data and visuals collected during the assessment mirrored residents' descriptions. The neighborhood lacks sidewalks and crosswalks, needs extensive drainage ditch and culvert repairs, and is uncomfortable to walk around due to illegal dumping and stray dogs (figure 7; figure 8).

Qualitative data about the history of the neighborhood, community safety, environmental concerns, and other needs and ideas were collected using several community engagement methods, as described below.

Community Engagement

Over the past 18 months, the ULI Houston project team engaged with residents of Settegast and the greater Northeast Houston area to understand Settegast’s assets, concerns, needs, and hopes for the future. The ULI Houston project team branded their local efforts as the “Actions for Health Equity in Settegast” project.

Residents were engaged through one-on-one listening sessions, small focus groups, large community workshops and events, presentations to community groups, door-knocking, and informal conversations (figure 9; figure 10). Two local community ambassadors were hired—Carolyn Rivera and Jessica Fuentes, who is bilingual—to serve as liaisons between the project team and residents. In addition, through a partnership with Harris County Precinct One, a language justice and translation consultant, Tecolotl LLC, was brought on board to create a more inclusive engagement process.



Figure 9. Settegast residents look at a community workshop poster in October 2022.



Figure 10. A Settegast resident writes an idea on a Post-it at the October 2022 community workshop.

A Leadership Committee composed of partners representing diverse interests and sectors was convened for the length of the project to provide feedback and guidance. The Leadership Committee established connections to additional partners, contributed to the development of the action agenda, and committed to working toward the implementation of the action agenda.

Practitioner Engagement

Four focus groups and many individual conversations were held with local developers and local government. In the first ULI and developer focus group, the conversation centered on defining affordability, health equity, and racial equity in the Houston area and Settegast. At the second ULI and developer focus group, HCPH presented demographic, housing, and property data for Settegast to inform a discussion on potential innovative development ideas that could meet residents' needs and involve residents in the development process.

The focus groups and conversations with representatives of numerous city and county departments were an opportunity to share information about the neighborhood and residents' needs. Likewise, it was also an opportunity for the Houston team to learn about existing policies, programs, and tools that could benefit Settegast residents. The conversations also illuminated shortcomings of regional policies worthy of further research and discussion.



ACTION AGENDA FOR CHANGE: REAL ESTATE PRACTICE

Part 1: Changes to Internal Real Estate Practice

1. Identify local ULI members who are interested in discussing ways to advance health and racial equity within ULI Houston.
2. Establish a committee or local council for health and racial equity within ULI Houston.
3. Develop a strategy for recruiting and engaging new members historically excluded from the ULI space.
 - Set up a BIPOC Leadership Initiative mirroring the existing Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI) or Young Leaders group in its format.
4. Develop a strategy for UrbanPlan to reach schools in low-income BIPOC communities. The strategy should include prioritization of communities based on the Social Vulnerability Index or other comparable measure. Secondly, specific schools would be prioritized or selected based on school readiness and willingness to participate.
5. Establish a paid apprenticeship program where ULI provides a stipend for new BIPOC developers focused on affordability. Partner with a local foundation or development partner to fund the opportunity. Start with a pilot program to work out the details and gauge interest.
6. Provide more local content on affordable development and development without displacement.
7. Intentionally design materials, webinars, and other engagement opportunities and materials to ensure ULI Houston's core tenets of health and racial equity (among others) are clear.

Part 2: Changes External to Real Estate Practice

1. Engage with community residents to understand how real estate development projects could better address community needs.
2. Hire local community members to serve as liaisons between the development or planning project team and the community for large-scale development projects.
3. Compensate community members who participate in the engagement process for their time.
4. Create more opportunities for community ownership of diverse development projects whether that is through financial, creative, or emotional investments on the part of residents.
5. For developers holding vacant lots, consider temporarily activating those lots by working with local nonprofits and community groups to determine temporary uses that would benefit the community and be affordable. The lots could be used for sports fields, park space, pop-up classes, concerts, gardens, art exhibits, markets, etc. depending on the location, surrounding uses, and neighborhood needs. Establish a committee or local council for health and racial equity within ULI Houston.

PROJECT SPOTLIGHT

A local real estate developer and entrepreneur, Chris Senegal took a unique approach to community ownership of development projects when many banks failed to support his idea to “Buy Back the Block.”¹⁷ He used crowdfunding as a primary funding source for one of his projects, which allowed residents to buy into the project financially by purchasing a stake at an affordable price. Senegal has purchased two entire blocks in the historically Black Fifth Ward neighborhood in Houston with the express purpose of revitalization without displacement.¹⁷ His vision for Black ownership and revitalization of Black neighborhoods in Houston has garnered support and emotional investment from residents in his projects.



ACTION AGENDA FOR CHANGE: POLICY



Part 3: Local Policy

1. Create a program to support resident, small-scale developers interested in revitalizing their own neighborhoods.
 - **Potential Partners:** ULI Houston, Mayor's Office of Complete Communities, Houston Department of Neighborhoods, Houston Planning and Development Department, the local planning and development community.

2. Adopt mechanisms to increase funding sources for new sidewalk installation and the repair of existing sidewalks, as part of a holistic pedestrian network, especially for communities where funding for new sidewalks is limited or nonexistent.
 - **Potential Partners:** Houston City Council, Houston Public Works Department, Houston Planning and Development Department, Harris County Precinct 1

3. Identify and explore additional funding sources (to supplement the existing Stormwater Fund) to increase service frequency and scope. This would improve maintenance of roadside drainage ditches including inspections, mowing, cleanup, general maintenance, and repairs within the Settegast area and citywide.
 - **Potential Partners:** Houston City Council, Houston Public Works Department, Houston Solid Waste Management Department
4. Adopt tools for prioritizing and phasing improvements in the area. Ensure that sidewalk and drainage improvements can be phased and implemented strategically to provide safe, accessible, and resilient options in the immediate, mid, and long terms as funding is available. Develop “shovel-ready” strategies for each phase to be well positioned to seek available grants and other sources of funding.
 - **Potential Partners:** Houston City Council, Houston Public Works Department, the local planning and development community, Harris County Public Health’s Built Environment Unit
5. Establish a set of best practices for community engagement during the development process. The conversations required for producing these guidelines could help eventually create a codified set of community engagement requirements for development in Houston.
 - **Potential Partners:** Houston Planning and Development Department, Houston City Council, ULI Houston, the local planning and development community



CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

This project led to many unique conversations between unlikely partners, about challenging topics, and about a neighborhood rarely discussed, particularly in the development sphere. This work resulted in a myriad of lessons to be applied to planning, development, and research projects moving forward. The most important of those lessons is that this project is not enough. While the action agenda describes changes in policy and practice for ULI Houston, local developers, and local government, it falls short of addressing the depth of concerns and needs expressed to the project team over the past 18 months.

To ensure the depth and breadth of community needs and ideas are expressed and addressed, Harris County Public Health will produce an Action Plan for Settegast and transfer ownership of the plan to a community group. The Action Plan for Settegast will include the actions listed in this Action Agenda for Change in addition to a robust list of actions that build on the commitments

and interests of Settegast residents and the Actions for Health Equity in Settegast project partners.

Historical and continued disinvestment in BIPOC communities by local government is a significant barrier to investment in neighborhoods like Settegast. Collaborative action is needed to address infrastructure quality and environmental concerns, to remove barriers to community investment, and to improve community health.

ULI Houston, developers, planners, nonprofits, local government, and residents all have a role to play in addressing the harms of past policies and practices and collectively pursuing health and racial equity. This action agenda outlines actions for change with the potential for broader positive impacts. Through continued partnership, conversations, and advocacy for implementation, the effects of those actions will be seen.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**Actions for Health Equity in Settegast
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**Houston Parks and Recreation Department
and Hobart Taylor Staff**

Houston Land Bank

Kinder Institute for Urban Research

Tecolotl LLC

Carolyn Rivera
Community Ambassador

Jessica Fuentes
Community Ambassador



Members of the project team in Carolyn Rivera's home in Settegast. From left: Carolyn White (HCPH), Charles Brown (Equitable Cities), Carolyn Rivera (Settegast resident, Community Ambassador), Kyle Maronie (HCPH, Settegast resident), Elizabeth Van Horn (HCPH), and Will Herbig (ULI).

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