

FOR THE EXCLUSIVE USE OF CARAMSMITH92@GMAIL.COM

From the Houston Business Journal:

<https://www.bizjournals.com/houston/news/2018/04/12/houstons-innovation-district-needs-to-be-an-asset.html>

SUBSCRIBER CONTENT:

< **CRANE WATCH**

Commercial Real Estate

Houston's innovation district needs to be 'an asset to communities like the Third Ward'



Private and public officials are closing in on a deal to develop the main campus of Houston's innovation district at 4201 Main St. — the site of the former Sears location in Midtown.

CARA SMITH/HBJ



By **Cara Smith** – Reporter, Houston Business Journal
Apr 12, 2018

Houston's innovation corridor, the main campus of which **will be housed in the former Sears building at 4201 Main**, hopes to bring a massive influx of tech companies and startups to the Midtown area. But due to its proximity to Midtown, Montrose and the Museum District, the Third Ward - one of six historic wards and one of the last historically black communities in Houston's urban core - has already suffered the effects of gentrification and is at risk for further damage.

With the innovation district being planned less than a mile away, it's only natural to ask: Will developers respect the integrity of the Third Ward?

"I don't think this needs to be a bad thing," said Assata Richards, chair of the board of directors at the Emancipation Economic Development Council, when asked about the innovation district. "But, we've learned hard lessons in this country that without policies to protect (vulnerable populations), there are some unintended consequences of development."



Assata Richards is the chair of the board of directors of the Emancipation Economic Development Council.

COURTESY ASSATA RICHARDS

Richards is also the founding director of Houston's nonprofit Sankofa Research Institute and teaches at the University of Houston.

The innovation corridor's campus will be built over the next two years and is expected to act as the heart of what will serve as Houston's innovation corridor. The innovation district is modeled after similar developments across the U.S. such as 1871, a digital startup incubator in Chicago.

Houston's innovation district is on a 9.4-acre site located between the Texas Medical Center and Midtown. The land isn't within the bounds of the Texas Medical Center, though, meaning that for-profit developments can be built on the land.

The Emancipation Economic Development Council was founded in 2015, Richards said, to address the concerns over gentrification in the city's historic wards and in the Montrose, Midtown and downtown area. Between 2000 and 2016, Houston's east

downtown, Second Ward, Rice Military, Heights and Memorial areas were among the fastest-gentrified neighborhoods in the nation, according to a study by Rent Cafe. Much of Montrose's affordable housing has disappeared in the past 10 years, experts agree.

“I think, quite frankly, that’s not an option,” said Gabriella Rowe, head of school at The Village School and learning committee chair for Houston Exponential, when asked how the innovation district could further gentrification. “It is neighborhoods like the Third Ward that make Houston the great, rich, diverse city that it is. ...If anyone would have the image that this innovation district is going to look like an extension of the glass buildings downtown, I don't think we'd be meeting our criteria of (building the district to) look like Houston and include Houston.”

Rowe said that "absolutely everything" related to the innovation district's development must be looked at through that lens - including the residential developments that'll surely rise in the future.

The Third Ward is far from a stranger to gentrification. Between 2006 and 2016, buildings in the Third Ward were demolished at a higher rate than other buildings in Harris County, [according to a Kinder Institute study](#). The study also showed that new construction occurred at a slower pace in the Third Ward compared to other Harris County communities.

Richards believes the district and the Third Ward can serve one another. The Third Ward has a wealth of potential employees that could staff the developments in and around the district, and the district may spur public improvement projects that'll benefit the Third Ward's residents. With that in mind, the Emancipation Economic Development Council is calling for policies that'll incentivize new affordable housing developments and protect residents from displacement.

“That was my mother’s first full time job (at the former Sears building in Midtown). That’s where I first got my ears pierced. That building sits in the heart of many Houstonians,” Richards said. “Whatever happens in that building has to be an asset and helping communities like the Third Ward.”