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Finding a recipe to preserve Vickery Meadow's unique flavor

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Rex C. Curry/Special Contributor

Cora Cardona (center) leads a theater class at Trans.lation Vickery Meadow. Carol Zou (third from right) is the effort's project director.

Theater director Cora Cardona leads children and a few moms in projecting their voices, but first they must warm up their bodies. "Like a sumo wrestler," she shouts as she squats and thrusts her arms out ready to fight.

Giggles tumble inside the storefront that houses Trans.lation Vickery Meadow, an art and cultural center in this neighborhood of refugees and immigrants from around the world.

Cardona is helping the kids find their voice — as are others in Vickery Meadow who hope to bring a new vibrancy to the northeast Dallas neighborhood.

Six weeks ago, Barry Annino was hired as director of the Vickery Meadow Public Improvement District, a taxing body established in 1993.

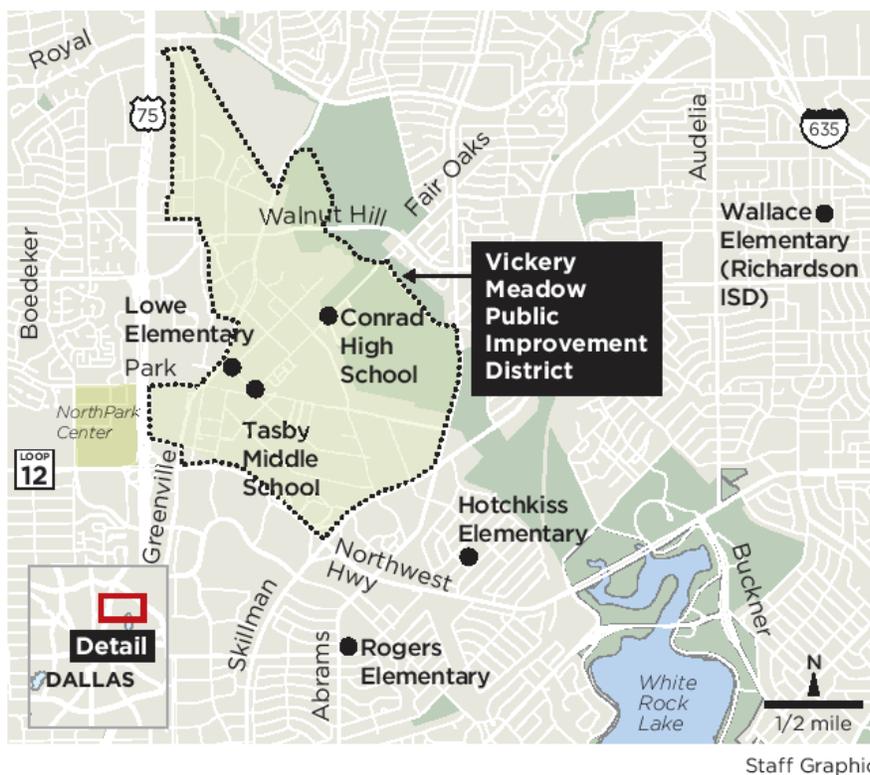
Annino says he sees himself as a change agent, buffeted by “two waves hitting each other.” One wave represents refugee and immigrant tenants, and the other wave represents developers who want property values to rise through a variety of initiatives.

“I have to bring it all together,” Annino said.

“Of course, diversity is part of the value here.”

Vickery Meadow sits on prime real estate that inspires some to pine for trendy restaurants and high-end lofts. Others fear such development would elevate rents and displace people who give the neighborhood its global vibe.

“I came here because I like variety and people who see things differently,” says Annino, the grandson of Italian immigrants who picked up Spanish as his second language.



About three dozen languages are spoken in Vickery Meadow, including Spanish among Mexicans, Arabic among Iraqis, and Amharic among Ethiopians. In the housing near Conrad High School, about half of the people are foreign-born and only 15 percent are homeowners, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. The median household income in 2013 dollars was \$23,000, less than half the Dallas County median of about \$49,000.

Last year, Annino worked as head of a new improvement district around Mockingbird Station that was rebranded as University Crossing. Before that he headed a similar group for 20 years in Deep Ellum, turf with a long musical history, an ever-changing foodie scene, artist lofts and an up-and-down crime rate.

Varied agenda

Annino's agenda includes battling crime, tackling traffic problems in a congested intersection, increasing code enforcement and finding a community center.

The neighborhood has the city's second-highest crime rate. It experienced a 17 percent increase in violent crime but an 11 percent fall in property crime in the first six months of this year from the same period in 2014.

The improvement district plans to devote about 40 percent of its annual \$610,000 budget — \$230,000 — to private security policing next year for nearly 100 apartment complexes, according to its service plan. Annino also wants to drive crime down through zoning changes, such as further restricting the hours establishments can sell liquor.

His agenda includes improving apartment housing by bringing in city code enforcers. "Refugees deserve a safe and clean environment," he said.

Despite a population of about 30,000, Vickery Meadow has few community spaces, public plazas and pocket parks.

Annino would like to transform a firehouse now used for storage into a community center, where flags of the refugees' homelands would flutter. Like many other groups in Vickery Meadow, he holds meetings in a community room at Half Price Books on Northwest Highway. The improvement district's offices inside an apartment complex are too dark, he said.

A long-proposed city library on Park Lane would benefit the neighborhood, which is dense with children. The city bought 5 acres and demolished an apartment complex, but the project stalled over financing.

Dallas City Council member Jennifer Staubach Gates, whose district includes the neighborhood, said a 2017 bond initiative could include money for the library construction.

"If I could figure a way to get this done with private-public financing, it would alleviate the competition in the bond program in 2017," Gates said. "Often, great things happen from outside City Hall."

Volunteers for change

Hundreds of volunteers working for change converged in Vickery Meadow in the last year. Part of that momentum is because of a percolating economy. Also, the spotlight focused on the area after the arrival and subsequent death of the nation's first Ebola patient, a visitor at a Vickery Meadow apartment.

The Rev. R.J. Holt heads "community transformation" for Park Cities Baptist Church and is part of a coalition that calls itself the Vickery Meadow brain trust. He's worried about the effect of rent increases of \$50 to \$100 a month. Developers need to know that churches like his take seriously that their "mandate is to help the poor," he said.

Martha Stowe, executive director of the Vickery Meadow Youth Development Foundation, said, "We are not working against the developers but working to make that neighborhood a good place to live right now."

Trans.lation opened a permanent space on Park Lane after its debut in 2013 as one of 10 off-campus art projects financed by the Nasher Sculpture Center for its 10th anniversary.

It sits in a small shopping strip with spicy smells wafting from an Ethiopian restaurant and an Ethiopian bakery. Surrounding the strip center are Vickery Baptist Church, Tasby Middle School and a pink snack bar that serves strawberries and cream and hibiscus tea.

Carol Zou, an China-born artist, is project director for the initiative, which began with crafts markets and small mobile galleries.

“There are a lot of competing priorities in this neighborhood,” Zou says. “I don’t want to take sides and am not. We are just here to advocate for the residents and empower them.”

Zou brings in immigrant art teachers to teach painting, dancing and crafts. She would like to bring the neighborhood’s cooks into pop-up food markets after they get city certification for food handling. “Food is such a wonderful expression of culture,” she said.

Also pitching in are artists from other parts of Dallas, like Cardona, who is founder of Teatro Dallas. As her theater class winds down, Cardona jokes with the children, toggling between English and Spanish. A girl named Angela smiles.

“The tools of the actor are?” Cardona asks.

“The voice and the body,” says the little girl.