

BILL ANALYSIS

C.S.H.C.R. 81
By: Hernandez
Culture, Recreation, & Tourism
Committee Report (Substituted)

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Denver Harbor neighborhood, in northeast Houston, is one of the oldest communities in the Bayou City.

Bounded on the north by Wallisville Road, on the west by the Houston Belt and Terminal Railroad, on the south by the Southern Pacific Railroad, and on the east by the Port Authority Railroad, the area was first settled in the 1890s. Platting in 1911 and again in 1913 created what were originally four distinct subdivisions: Denver, Harbor, Harbordale, and Liberty Heights.

Many early residents were Texans who had left hardscrabble farms for the city in hopes of making a better life for themselves and their families. These citizens found work on the railroads and at various industrial companies that sprang up along the Houston Ship Channel.

Those who put down roots in Denver Harbor found it a good place to raise a family. Among the neighborhood's amenities were Charles Eliot Elementary School, churches, drug stores, and the Globe Theater, where children could watch the latest Hollywood westerns for the sum of nine cents.

The Great Depression hit Denver Harbor hard, and many families in the neighborhood lost their homes. As the 1930s drew to an end, however, a curious occurrence did much to lift the spirits of the beleaguered community: on June 1, 1939, the morning sun revealed the word "Podunk" emblazoned on the formerly blank side of the local water tower. Thought the city tried repeatedly to cover over the word, the name would always reappear within a few days.

Inspired by the spunky defiance of the sign's unknown painters, area residents soon began asserting their identity as Podunkers, and the name was even adopted by a youth basketball team, the Podunk Skunks.

Today, Denver Harbor reflects the ethnic diversity of Houston itself, with Hispanics forming the core of its population. The community is currently undergoing revitalization, especially along Lyons Avenue, where a new fire station has opened and a number of new businesses have set up shop. Residents are also served by four elementary school, a middle school, and a private school.

The story of this resilient neighborhood is told in the book *Where the Hell Is Podunk, Texas?*, which won a honorable mention at the 2006 Independent Publisher Book Awards. Dr. Jay Grady, the volume's author, grew up in Denver Harbor. Following the publication of his historical account, a Podunk reunion brought together many present and former residents age 80 and older.

Notable Houstonians who have resided in Denver Harbor include Richard Vara, Harris County justice of the peace, Tina Reyes, member of the board of the Houston Independent School District, Raul Martinez, the first Mexican American constable in Harris County, and Elis C. "Ace" Martinez, the first Mexican American firefighter in Houston. Assigned to Station 27, in Denver Harbor, Mar. Martinez spent 36 years with the department and achieved the rank of sergeant before his retirement. In December 2005, the department dedicated Fire Engine No. 27 to his memory. Other prominent residents of the neighborhood have included the late Joe E. Moreno, who represented District 143 in the Texas Legislature, and his predecessors in that office, Ben T. Reyes, who also served on the Houston City Council, and Al Luna.

The citizens of Denver Harbor take great pride in the heritage of their community and in the unpretentious name that earlier residents made their own. It is the wish of the neighborhood, with the expressed support of the Denver Harbor Civic Club and Bill White, mayor of Houston, that this community's identification with that simple but enduring locale of the imagination be appropriately recognized, and a declaration to that effect is indeed appropriate.

RULEMAKING AUTHORITY

It is the committee's opinion that this bill does not expressly grant any additional rulemaking authority to a state officer, department, agency, or institution.

ANALYSIS

Denver Harbor, aka Podunk, is designated as the official Mythical Town of Texas.

COMPARISON OF ORIGINAL TO SUBSTITUTE

The substitute adds several famous past and present residents of Denver Harbor, including former State Representatives Ben T. Reyes, Al Luna, and Joe E. Moreno, and includes that the designation has received the support of the City of Houston and the Denver Harbor Civic Club.