Tacoma brings in new prosperity with the Light Rail system that connects Tacoma to Seattle, but will it sweep away long-time Tacoma residents?

The Hilltop neighborhood in Tacoma, Washington, is one of the most impacted by gentrification in the country, according to a study that compared census data from 2000 and the 2016 American Community Survey. Hilltop was ranked #20 in the entire country — this was in comparison to rapidly grow neighborhoods in San Francisco, New York City, and Houston.

Hilltop was once a thriving part of midtown life in Tacoma’s early history, but the migration of major businesses away from Tacoma — as well as the development of the Tacoma Mall — contributed to its economic downturn. Various gang activity, drugs, and a rash of other criminal activities during the 1980s through the late 1990s gave the community a negative reputation.

In the early 1900’s in Tacoma, the federal government contracted with local real estate appraisers, mortgage lenders and developers. According to one local researcher, there were maps created that divided neighborhoods into grades based on desirability—many “hazardous” neighborhoods were less desirable and sold to families of color. Up until the 1980’s, some properties contained covenants that were racially restrictive, despite the fact that a 1948 ruling had ruled these covenants Unconstitutional.

U.S. Census data show people living in formerly redlined neighborhoods earn far less, are less likely to have college degrees and are far less likely to own homes, whose value is in large part due a family’s financial worth. Two Census tracts in Tacoma illustrate these disparities: the North End, which was rated as a high desirability neighborhood, and a “hazardous” neighborhood, Hilltop, due to the presence of environmental hazards. While Hilltop’s median family income as of the 2010 census is $17,000, the North End’s is $81,000.

However, Hilltop recovered from its dilapidation in the 21st century, through persistently successful local businesses and a community that cared about the wellbeing of its neighbors.

While the Tacoma Light Rail is supposed to provide affordability for low-income populations, housing costs are rising significantly there, forcing residents to leave.

William Towey, a researcher at the University of Washington Tacoma campus, has researched geographic mobility in Tacoma. Between 2010 and 2015, 35% of African American residents moved out of the neighborhood of Hilltop, he reported.

Many long-time residents have moved out of Hilltop in recent years, opting for modern, affordable apartment complexes near the Tacoma Mall and its transit center.

Tacoma mayor Victoria Woodard’s mother, Sharise Woodards, left her apartment in Hilltop in 2018, after her rent was increased. It went from $800 a month, to nearly $1200.

Hilltop’s demographics currently include 40% people of color, 25% low-income, and 30% people who have no vehicle. The population of Tacoma’s is about 65% White, and the other 35% identify as people of color, as
recorded in the Census. However, contrary to county-wide and regional trends, Hilltop has a growing white population.

In Tacoma, condominium construction, mixed-use developments and market-rate apartments are cropping up along the proposed Tacoma Link Light Rail expansion route. Constructing "multi-use" buildings that create affordable housing makes sense for developers and property owners from an economic standpoint.

**Robertson Building Company**, one of the city’s largest developers, has purchased four other buildings with plans to buy more. Robertson CEO Matt Shaw predicts that Hilltop will be the next up-and-coming neighborhood that will attract Seattle enterprise because the corridor there sits near the planned Light Rail station, next to a handful of planned mixed-use developments, and is a five-minute drive from Interstate 5.

So what does this mean for the current Hilltop residents?

Tacoma has an eight-year multi-family property-tax break, which is available to developers who build strictly market-rate housing. Some argue that this may be increasing rates of gentrification in the city. Tacoma city council members are working on a bill to amend this tax break, but it could be multiple years in the making.

Developing companies like Robertson benefit from the city’s tax break. This incentive exempts property taxes for eight to 12 years on the assessed improvements that create four or more additional housing units. To qualify for this break, at least 20% of the newly created units must be affordable to renters with household incomes no greater than 80% of the area’s median income.

But there is no restriction on price for the other 80% of newly created units, and it seems to be creating a large opportunity for developers in the area.

"The market just snuck up on us, and now housing prices are higher than we ever thought they’d be, and it’s like we’ve lost control," Walker Lee, a council member, said.

This does not bode well for the long-time Hilltop residents. Although many live on a fixed income, if property prices were to increase, many people of a low socioeconomic status may be forced out.
McMaster lecture draws controversy from student groups
The class of 2024 is having one of the most unique freshman experiences ever to be recorded in history. On July 29, President Isiaah Crawford sent out an email letting the entire student body and community know that we were going to be virtual during the fall semester. The school had held out until the end of July to decide in hopes that we would be able to continue in-person during the fall.

When President Crawford announced that we would be going virtual, the entire semester became an unknown. The class of 2024 are having such a unique experience as freshmen that we decided to interview some of them about their daily lives as freshmen. Most of the freshmen I spoke to are at home and not on campus enjoying the usual freshman experience. Jenna Hlavaty said, “It’s not what we expected but we have to work with it.”

Eliza Koch seemed to echo the sentiment, “I’m a bit sad I’m not on campus. It’s nice to have my family though.”
Cassidy Vallin felt that this was not the best way to start off college, but that she believes that the University is trying their hardest.

“My classes are great but it’s not a great freshman experience,” Vallin said. Vallin is at home in Westminster, Colorado, living in an apartment with her two older siblings. When asked what the biggest problem they’ve run across is, Vallin shared, “My internet: My Zoom will cut out every two minutes and I end up missing half the lecture.”

We also spoke to freshman Khysa Gustafson, who is at home in San Diego. They shared that they also have had issues with Wi-Fi, though they mentioned that they do feel lucky. “Sometimes my Wi-Fi is janky at my mom’s house. I think I’m very lucky and privileged. I’m safe from fire, and corona. I’m not as vulnerable as other kids. I have a laptop, a phone, and Wi-Fi,” Gustafson said.

Even though Gustafson has shared that they have had Wi-Fi troubles, they still remain optimistic with virtual school.

The freshmen orientation was like no other orientation this year. According to Hlavaty, they enjoyed orientation. “I really liked it. I had Talia and Will. We had a great time. It was a good opportunity,” Hlavaty said. Gustafson also shared that they enjoyed orientation saying, “It was fun. I feel like I didn’t quite bond with everyone until the last meeting. My favourite part was the academic fair. I was able to meet eight professors. They were all super nice.” While Hlavaty might have enjoyed their time, other students did not share quite the same sentiment. Koch felt that even though orientation was positive, they also felt it was overwhelming. Vallin also seemed to have similar sentiments sharing that they felt orientation was long.
“A lot of being on the computer and lots of Zoom with people you don’t know. It was uncomfortable. Orientation groups were fun. It was a nice intro into academics but it was a little rough,” Vallin said.

Vallin shared that their classes were going well. They stated that their math class was really difficult and that it is hard to stay focused when the professor is lecturing. Vallin stated that they are also enjoying their seminar class, Technologies of Power, with English professor Alison Tracy Hale.

“It’s very stimulating. Our conversations happen well,” Vallin said.

Hlavaty also shared their feelings on how classes have been going, “The transition’s been good. I think we still face difficulties in discussion. As every class goes by everyone’s getting used to it.”

Many students expressed how they feel like they are missing out on the college experience in terms of interaction with peers.

“Socially, it’s rough.” Vallin said. “[The best thing] is being able to spend time with family, which is nice.”

Koch stated that they felt disappointed that we were going virtual. They felt that the virtual aspect makes it difficult to make friends.

The University of Puget Sound has to accommodate this new way of learning. When President Crawford announced that the school would be going virtual, some students felt that this announcement was made too close to the start of the school year and that it would have been nice to know earlier.
Hlavaty felt that the decision the school made came out later than they would have liked. They also felt that the school has been good about being communicative. Gustafson did not feel they were well-informed, but they don’t blame the university for that.

“This school felt disorganized and I don’t think it was done successfully, but I’m not sure it could be done successfully,” Gustafson said.

Koch said that they felt prepared, though there were moments of confusion throughout the summer. Vallin, however, did not feel prepared.

“I felt like I was in the dark,” Vallin said. “I was ready to go to Tacoma and then they switched. The switch was abrupt.”

Vallin, Gustafson, Hlavaty, and Koch had all purchased their plane tickets to come to Tacoma and they were ready to move into the dorms. Some of the students managed to get refunds or move their flights, but not everyone was able to get a refund for their plane ticket.

Despite all of the troubles that have been occurring for the students, the class of 2024 seems to be handling the new changes well. The university is doing their best to accommodate their students, and as Vallin said in their interview: “Switching to online shows me they’re thinking about their students first and foremost.”
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The Susan Resneck Pierce Lecture in Public Affairs and the Arts normally invites esteemed speakers such as Jed S. Rakoff and Valerie Jarrett to campus. This year, however, the student body was less than pleased about who the university chose to speak: H.R. McMaster.

McMaster has a long history of working for the military, from his time in the Gulf War to teaching at West Point. Most notably, there are a multitude of human rights violations against him.
When he was a commander in the second Iraq war, he oversaw a detainee camp. The conditions for the prisoners were reportedly abhorrent. Prisoners were apparently not given food and water, and it seemed that they were not allowed to go to the bathroom. After his time in Iraq, McMaster served as the United States National Security Advisor from 2017 to 2018. He, however, was dismissed from this position.

Many students spoke out against the choice of McMaster for the lecture. Despite the negative feedback, the university chose to have McMaster speak. The Susan Resneck Pierce Lecture was held via Zoom on Sept. 8.

In response to a student email asking why McMaster was being allowed to speak at campus, President Isiaah Crawford said, “We endeavor to bring to campus speakers with a wide variety of views, experiences, and ideas. The intention is to challenge assumptions, expose us to new ideas, and gain perspective on disparate approaches and decision-making that shape the items in which we live.”

Multi Identity-Based Union posted an Instagram post explaining their dislike of McMaster, as well as condemning the way the school has handled the backlash. In response to President Crawford’s email, MIBU said, “Personally, we think that students can be exposed to new ideas, gain perspective, and be healthily challenged in our dimensions of thought by speakers and individuals who have zero human rights violation allegations attached to their name.” Many students reposted MIBU’s post to show their support.

MIBU also spoke up on Facebook. In a post, the club said, “President Isiaah Crawford has defended this choice multiple times when approached with mutual concerns about giving a...
war imperialist with human rights allegations a platform to speak at our university. He has justified the choice on the basis of ‘freedom of speech’ and because of the fact that ‘we’ve had this planned for months.’”

Many other students had opinions about the lecture as well. Senior Hugh Schmidt said that they were surprised when they found out the university was asking McMaster to speak based on his past in the second Iraq war.

“I was angry that the University of Puget Sound, a school that has this progressive reputation, would pay one of the facilitators of this war likely tens of thousands of dollars,” Schmidt said. “This is a guy who has built his wealth, career, fame, by standing atop the bodies of a hundred thousand dead Iraqis — and we’re paying him to promote his book.”

In a Facebook post Liv Reintsma said, “It doesn’t seem like the least bit of research was done on this guy. Or worse, the research WAS done and the allegations were ignored by the university staff in charge of hiring him. And it’s not just a matter of letting him share his opinions and taking up this space, he’s being paid a LOT to do so.”

Some students felt that even more should have been done to change the university’s mind about having McMaster speak. “Honestly, we didn’t raise enough concern over him being here,” senior Maija Peterson said in a Facebook post. “His talk will be a slap in the face to all the work BIPOC students and faculty have been doing this summer. They should have brought in a speaker to speak on the revolution that is going on right now.”

Not only was the student body disappointed in the university’s reaction to allowing McMaster to speak, but the student body...
was not happy with the lecture itself.

“It was exactly what I’d expected — mindless, nationalistic, imperialist, warmongering drivel,” Schmidt said. “He didn't stay in one place for too long. Everything from saying China's handling of Covid should be compared to 9/11 as a direct attack against the US, to claiming Obama should have put troops in Syria to topple the Assad regime. He continually ignored the United States’ role in the genocide of the Iraqi people.”

Many students were not happy with the results of the lecture or the school for hosting McMaster. In their Instagram post, MIBU stated, “During a pandemic that is disproportionately impacting underprivileged groups and racial and civil war it seems highly inappropriate to bring Lt. General H.R. McMaster, and MIBU condemns this decision.”
Three-dimensional art piece, The Girl House, takes students’ experiences on a tour of the Tacoma area.

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