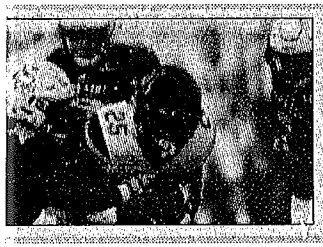

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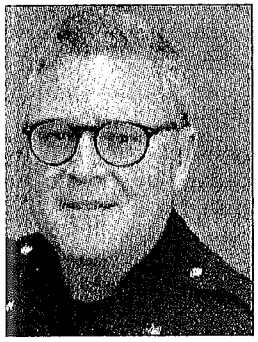

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LOCAL CULTURE

Report: Poverty in San Marcos atypical

ROBIN BLACKBURN
STAFF REPORTER

Although the university student population contributes to the poverty rate in San Marcos, a Texas State University professor found, poverty among non-students is on the rise even as San Marcos becomes less of a college town.

Dr. Thomas Longoria, professor of political science at the university, gave a presentation to the San Marcos City Council on Monday called "Understanding Poverty in San Marcos, Texas: A Comparative Perspective." Among his preliminary findings were that when students are taken into account, the poverty rate in San Marcos is 37 percent – just below the 40 percent threshold that is considered concentrated poverty – but without students, the poverty rate drops to 23 percent. However, Longoria said, the non-student poverty rate in San Marcos is growing rapidly, and although the university enrollment figures are rising every year San Marcos is losing some of what researchers consider the characteristics of a typical college town.

Longoria's report also noted that when students are included in the equation, four census tracts in San Marcos qualify as concentrated poverty areas, but when students are taken out of those statistics only one census tract – in Millview East and Millview West – is considered a concentrated poverty area.

Longoria told the city council that the former city manager and some representatives from the Greater San Marcos Partnership had approached him about doing some research to help local officials and other decision-makers understand poverty in San Marcos.

"I had conversations with different officials, elected and appointed, and with people with the Greater San

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Marcos Partnership," Longoria said in an interview in August. "It was clear the subject of poverty was on their minds."

Longoria said some officials said the city's economic situation was improving, some said it was getting worse, some said the poverty level was because of the student population and some said it wasn't, and he wanted to answer the questions. His report, he said, "answers that one question: Is San Marcos' poverty rate a function of students? The answer is no."

In his report, Longoria mentioned that generally, poverty rates in college towns are discounted because students are included in the U.S. Census poverty calculations. Poverty among students is an issue, the report states, but for the most part student poverty is viewed as voluntary and temporary, unlike non-student poverty. The failure to distinguish between student and non-student poverty levels can make effective policy decisions difficult. Longoria said other college towns have faced similar questions about student and non-student poverty, and similar studies have been done in Richmond, Virginia, and Boulder, Colorado, among other cities.

Population shifts and a changing city

During his presentation to council, Longoria emphasized to council members that his research was based on sample data and that more research needs to be done to better understand factors that contribute to non-student poverty and thus what can be done to improve residents' prospects.

"This is aggregate data," he told the council. "We don't have a clear understanding of all the stories. Without talking to people, it's hard to understand what's going on."

Longoria's research showed that overall, the poverty rate in San Marcos has remained constant as student poverty has slightly declined and non-student poverty has increased. Longoria reported that although the non-student poverty rate in San Marcos is on the rise, the figures in his report are estimates.

"You do see an uptick in the non-student poverty rate from 19 to 23 percent," he said. "I would say the poverty rate is trending up, but how much is it trending up? It's hard to say."

Moreover, Longoria's research found that the growth in non-student poverty is slower in San Marcos than in other suburbs in the Austin metropolitan area, such as Round Rock and Pflugerville – though Round Rock did see a similar jump in non-student poverty rates.

Longoria attributed the increase in non-student poverty in the cities surrounding Austin to the suburbanization of poverty. Whereas 20 years ago, poor people lived in central cities and rich people lived in the suburbs, this is changing as city living becomes more expensive, Longoria said. Now, more people live outside of central cities than in central cities.

"This is a reality the city decision makers in San Marcos are going to have to face, without a doubt," he said.

Longoria pointed out that the growth in San Marcos' non-student population could be attributed to the supply of older – and therefore cheaper – apartment options in San Marcos that no longer serve as student housing. Furthermore, he said that if university graduates stay in San Marcos for a year or two and choose to be underemployed while they decide on a career – or because they simply enjoy the quality of life in San Marcos – their presence could account for some of the non-student poverty found in the city.

In the interview in August, Longoria pointed out that San Marcos is a nice place to live, with the river and other amenities, its proximity to Austin and the chance to live a pleasant lifestyle, so some students could decide to stay even after they graduate.

"Part of it could be because things are going very well in San Marcos," he said. "Those people are not students anymore, but they're very young."

As more non-students move into San Marcos, some of the city's characteristics are changing and, according to a measurement called the College Town Index, San Marcos is losing some of its college-town character. Longoria explained to the council that the index includes criteria associated with college towns, like the percentage of the population born outside the state or how many residents commute non-traditionally. Though San Marcos is like the average Texas college town in many respects, Longoria reported, overall it is becoming less distinctive of a college town.

As for whether that trend will continue, Longoria told the council, "We don't know. We'll have to follow this over time."

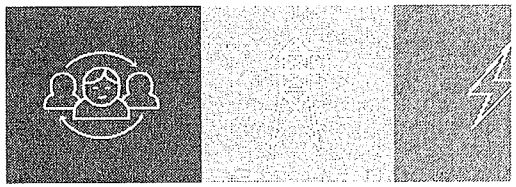
Longoria emphasized that more research is needed to get a fuller picture of poverty in San Marcos.

"We don't know what's going on," he said. "We need to talk to these folks."

He also told the council that university researchers would like to continue their research on the issue and present reports to the city every year.

Council member Scott Gregson praised Longoria's work as a step forward in helping improve economic conditions for San Marcos' residents.

"We've got to have a starting point," Gregson said.



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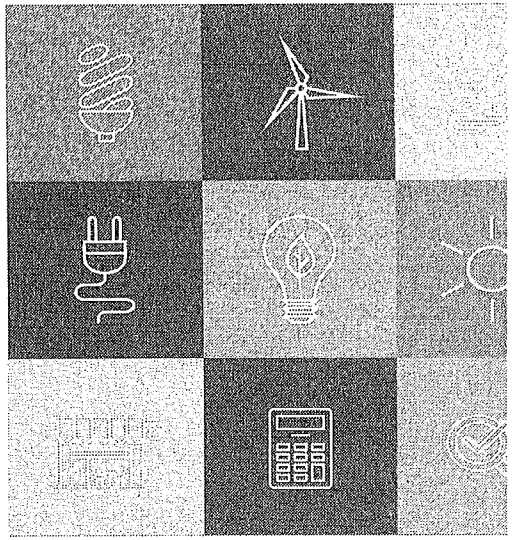

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