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Could you give up your house if city knocked? *JACQUIELYNN FLOYD*

Unless you take a wrong turn and get lost, you're not likely to run across the little neighborhood that will one day be midfield for the new Dallas Cowboys stadium. It's tucked away from the main roads, and its lumpy little streets are only a block or two long.

And, truth to tell, it's not much to look at. There are some raggedy apartments and a few blocks of humble little houses built not long after the end of World War II. A ways to the southeast, where Cowboys fans will eventually be tailgating out of their SUVs, there's a nondescript mobile-home park.

If I lived there, I'd probably welcome a buyout. I'd be delighted that the city of Arlington wanted to pay me the market resale price for my house, plus a juicy \$22,000 bonus for vacating within three months - if I lived there.

But I don't live there, and the people who do may or may not feel the same way. And I have to wonder: What if somebody came to my comfortable Denton County house that I like so much and said, "You have to sell this place, and furthermore, we get to decide what's a fair price, and that's the law." Would I still be so delighted?

I can't answer that. But if it's your home, if it's where you live and raised your kids and know your neighbors, maybe there's more to it than money.

There must be, because property owners who plan to fight the city's planned buyout of the area for the new stadium are in for a long, bumpy ride. Their fight might end with a tidy settlement - some property owners in similar situations have won generous payoffs to drop their legal battles - but the fight can be long, bitter and crushingly costly.

"It's a huge game of chicken, and it's a hugely expensive game of chicken," said Glenn Sodd, the Corsicana lawyer who has been approached by some of the Arlington residents about challenging the buyout offers.

Mr. Sodd represented some families that held out against Hurst's buyout of their neighborhood to make way for an expansion of North East Mall. In the end, the 10 families that joined in the lawsuit settled for \$3 million, but it was an oddly joyless victory.

"You work all your life for a home, then someone says, 'Get out of here,'" one Hurst resident told The Dallas Morning News when that suit was settled in mid-2000 after four years of litigation.

It's uncertain legal territory, because Texas law remains untested as to exactly when cities may exercise eminent domain. That's a city's right to condemn and purchase private property for "public improvements."

Historically, such improvements tended to be highways or public facilities like parks or schools.

More recently, cities have pushed the boundary, using eminent domain for private developments (shopping malls, football stadiums) that they deem to carry a public benefit, such as expanding the tax base.

Mr. **Sodd** is already milking the drama in this case pretty shamelessly: "What these cities are doing is un-American. They're banking on wearing these people out till they give in."

But he's got a point. Under eminent domain, you don't get to decide how much you want for your property. That way, a single determined crank cannot block a new highway by demanding \$1 million for his toolshed.

On the other hand, we're loath in this country to tell people that they have to pack up and get out of their houses unless there's an awfully compelling reason for it.

A consultant hired by the city has already set up shop in the neighborhood to start making buyout offers. When I stopped by to ask what kind of welcome they were getting, I got the bum's rush from a lady who hustled me out the door.

I don't see why, since her last customer was a happy one, a college student who had just agreed to move out of his apartment sometime before August in exchange for a \$5,000 bonus, which is being offered to renters.

"If you're renting, it's not a bad deal at all," he said happily, obviously pleased about his good fortune. He had no cause for complaint.

I honestly can't say what I'd do if the city where I live said I had to sell my house, even for market value with a nice bonus attached. I don't know whether I'd sell on the spot or come out swinging.

But I'm glad they're not asking.

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