

Community Forum for Economic Development Report to the membership, November 2013

The mission of the Community Forum is to promote economic development, the process of increasing living standards and opportunities for area residents. Our activities combine public education, community organizing, and advocacy for public policy changes that promote social and economic equity.

These activities (educating, organizing and advocating) are complementary and mutually reinforcing. To advocate for changes in policy, it is necessary to organize public support, and organizing public support requires a broad understanding of relevant issues. Moreover, the very process of organizing for change creates a deeper understanding, and makes public policy advocacy more effective.

2013 Public meetings and forums

In January, Scott Ford, Executive Director of the Department of Community Investment, reviewed the approach of the new City Administration to economic development in South Bend.

February's program featured Leroy Cobb, a founding member of "Better Homes of South Bend," a group of homeowners who were Pioneers of Community Development for South Bend's West Side in the 1950's.

The discussion at the March meeting focused on St. Joseph County Property Tax Issues. Our guest panel included County Assessor Rosemary Mandrici, County Auditor Peter Mullen, County Treasurer Mike Kruk, County Council President Rafael Morton and President of the County Board of Commissioners Andrew Kostielney

In April, we viewed the documentary, "Holding Ground, the Rebirth of Dudley Street." The film described a Boston neighborhood's efforts to revitalize their community.

May's program was entitled "How Does the City of South Bend Decide Where to Spend Our Money?" Participating in the discussion were City Controller Mark Neal, Deputy City Controller John Murphy, Chris Fielding from Dept. of Community Investment and SB Common Council members Karen White and Dave Varner.

June's discussion topic, "The Role of Code Enforcement in Tackling Vacant and Abandoned Properties," featured Shuhbada Kambli, Executive Director of SB's Department of Code Enforcement.

Indiana State Senator John Broden joined us in August for a discussion of Indiana Health Care and the Affordable Care Act. We planned no CFED meeting in September. Instead we built support for a community forum on the Affordable Care Act, sponsored by the St. Joseph County Minority Health Coalition.

Speakers at the October program, "The Fight for Educational Equity," were educator and Community Forum Board member Regina Williams-Preston and Wilner Cusic, a program specialist for IN*Source, a parent support group for families of children with disabilities.

2013 Program Areas

1. Issue: Vacant and Abandoned Properties/ Neighborhood revitalization

The Community Forum advocates a community-based approach in addressing the problem of vacant and abandoned properties. Although we don't oppose the demolition of structures that cannot be reclaimed, we advocate the rehabilitation of housing wherever possible.

During 2013, we established a CFED V&A Housing Committee that includes residents from throughout the City as well as contractors and small investors. Members of this group testified before the Common Council in support of Bill 13-14, participated in the Project Restoration Special Committee of the Common Council and participated in a public hearing about South Bend's use of CDBG funds.

We developed a position paper, "Neighbors Saving Neighborhoods -- Using a community-based approach to address vacant and abandoned housing," and are supporting the formation of a new Far North-west Neighborhood Association.

2. Issue: Responsible use of public resources/ Economic justice for AJ Wright Workers

The Community Forum developed a proposal to use AJ Wright penalty money (received by the City of SB from a development agreement that the company violated) to help AJ Wright workers who lost their jobs when the company left town. Because AJ Wright was responsible for the workers' unemployment, it is only fair that the penalty money be used to help the struggling workers.

Working with a leadership team of workers, we organized several events that provided an opportunity for the workers to build support for the proposal. Workers told their stories at a public gathering, spoke at a City Council meeting, wrote letters to the Mayor and Council, and met with the Mayor and Council members.

3. Issue: Responsible use of public resources/ Public participation in the SB Budget Process

Since the municipal election of 2011, the Community Forum has monitored the City of South Bend's budgetary decisions with the intent of advocating a process that is more transparent and responsive to citizen input. These efforts often have been in collaboration with the local chapter of the League of Women Voters.

During the past year we sponsored a public forum on the budget process, met with Common Council members and with the City Controller, and attended the many meetings preceding the passage of the budget for 2014. We have also proposed that a "Citizen's Guide to the Budget" be posted on the City Website and that a Citizens Advisory Commission be created to promote more effective public accountability in the way government spends public monies, and to encourage the informed and active participation of citizens in government.

4. Issue: Economic development/ Improved financial stability for low- and middle-income residents

Members of our organization have, since 2007, participated in the VITA (Volunteer Income Tax Assistance) program, coordinated locally by the United Way of St. Joseph County. We have recruited and trained tax preparers and other volunteers needed to maintain a program that, last year, prepared 2,672 tax returns for low and moderate-income residents.

We also are part of the United Way Prosperity Building Committee that supports efforts to combine economic assistance with programs that develop financial stability for low-income families.

5. Issue: Immigration reform

The Community Forum is a member organization of the Northern Indiana Coalition for Immigration Reform and has helped to build support for Coalition activities.

6. Issue: Food security

We have continued to support the Urban Garden Market, an open-air farmers market on the West Side of South Bend. This market is located in an area commonly described as a "food desert." Our support has included volunteer recruitment and electronic marketing.

In addition, our members continue to attend and participate in activities of the LaSalle Square/LWW Committee, observe meetings of the Redevelopment Commission and the Minority & Women Enterprise Activity Board and have monitored the proposal for Vote Centers in the St. Joseph County.