

2019 MESSAGE TO OUR MEMBERSHIP: IT'S BEEN QUITE A YEAR!

During 2019, the Community Forum for Economic Justice carried on our work under conditions that were anything but calm and predictable -- not only nationally and internationally, but also locally. Our Mayor is running for U.S. President, the May 7th Primary Election for Mayor and Common Council included a large number of experienced community activists among the candidates. On June 16, Eric Logan was fatally shot by South Bend Police Sargent Ryan O'Neill and the response from our community was immediate and intense.

These events brought national and even international attention to our City. They also provided the conditions under which we continued to address our mission, not only through educational forums, but also by advocating policies and practices that promote social and economic equity and enable everyone to obtain a living standard sufficient to sustain life in dignity.

Three examples of organizing projects from 2019

1. RSVP ordinance (Rental Safety Verification Program)

In January a proposal was brought before the SB Common Council for a proactive inspection program to address safety and health concerns in rental housing. The RSVP ordinance was developed by members of the Mayor's office, the Department of Code Enforcement, and community activists, including members of the Lead Affinity Group (individuals from public and private groups concerned about the dangers of lead contamination of our housing stock).

Support for the ordinance depended upon involving all stakeholders in the discussion of the proposal -- renters, landlords, and homeowners in neighborhoods with rental properties, as well as City departments such as Code Enforcement and the County Health Department. At the request of the Mayor's Office, our January Public Forum combined all of these stakeholders, who packed the meeting room and participated in an intense but respectful discussion of proposal details that would best improve the health and safety of rental properties. A second, similarly productive public meeting was held in the Common Council chambers. Suggestions were made and accepted to improve the ordinance and it passed with no opposition.

2. Reparations Project

Early this year, many Democratic Party candidates developed positions on Reparations -- actions that could repair the damages not only from the enslavement of Black people but also from the post-Reconstruction policies and practices instituted to maintain segregation and racial injustice. We took advantage of Darryl Heller's visits to South Bend to sponsor two programs that shared important historical information about these events and resulted in the formation of an on-going group of activists who intend to spread this discussion throughout our community and especially to understand and repair the economic disparities that still exist in our City and County.

3. Development without Displacement

Although the Community Forum was formed as a St. Joseph County organization, and early organizing projects included the County Tax Abatement Ordinance and opposition to a CAFO (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation) near Lakeville, most of our efforts have focused on South Bend. That changed this year. Growing collaboration with OSSA, the Open Space and Agricultural Alliance, deepened our understanding of unifying challenges resulting from economic development that doesn't improve but rather harms the common good of communities.

EDUCATIONAL EVENTS IN 2019

January - “Can We Improve the Health and Safety of Rental Properties in South Bend?”

A discussion of the proposed RSVP (Rental Safety Verification Program) Ordinance by renters, landlords, homeowners and representatives of the City of South Bend. The discussion provided information and suggestions that strengthened the ordinance that was adopted by the City.

February - “Community Listening Session on Homelessness”

Sheltered and non-sheltered residents of South Bend shared a dinner together and then learned about the experiences of homeless men and women in South Bend. A follow up session provided updates from service providers about the existing and proposed housing opportunities.

April - “Payday Lending: Important Community Service, Necessary Evil, or Just Plain Evil”

The unanimous conclusion, of both panel members and those in attendance, was that the answer to predatory lending is good jobs providing wages sufficient for basic needs.

May - “A Conversation About Reparations”, led by Dr. Darryl Heller

This lecture and discussion resulted in the development of an on-going educational project about the history of disenfranchisement of Black people in the U.S, including both the policies and practices that have resulted in the institutional racism that continues to maintain the injustices we struggle against today, both nationally and locally.

June - “Economic Development for Rural St. Joseph County,” co-sponsored by the Community Forum for Economic Justice and the Open Space and Agricultural Alliance. This meeting was held in New Carlisle and featured a presentation by Sybil Drew, a filmmaker from Elwood, Illinois, who shared the consequences of a development project that turned her small town into a freight terminal and vastly eroded the quality of life of the residents.

August - “Reparations: Building Community Understanding” a large audience attended Dr. Heller’s second presentation of the decisions and practices that developed the legacy of systemic separation still active today. Small group discussions explored how this history speaks to us in South Bend and what it might call on us to do to repair our community.

September - “Development Without Displacement! Both a City Issue and a County Issue,” featured community activists from South Bend and from St. Joseph County who shared their stories of protecting neighborhoods against any negative effects of economic development. Their experiences illustrated why we need development without the destruction of people’s homes or their quality of life.

October - We traveled by yellow school bus through the areas discussed at the September meeting: South Bends West Side, German Township, New Carlisle and the Ardmore neighborhood. Residents of each area provided additional information about what we saw.