

COMMUNITY FORUM FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT A REPORT TO THE MEMBERSHIP, NOVEMBER 2010

During the past year, the Community Forum for Economic Development has focused on three program areas: public education, public policies concerning economic development and programs that improve economic opportunities and overall quality of life.

A. Education to promote public involvement

1. During last year, we sponsored four **public forums on local economic development**.
 - In January, Jeff Gibney, Director of South Bend's Community and Economic Development Department, described "What's Next for Down Town South Bend."
 - In May, Salvation Army Major Bob Webster and South Bend Heritage Director Phil Byrd shared plans for the St. Joseph County Kroc Center, a \$60 million community center.
 - Last June, St. Joseph County Library Director Don Napoli appeared before an overflow audience of community members seeking information about the threat to close the LaSalle Branch Library.
 - Finally, in September we collaborated with the League of Women Voters and the IUSB American Democracy Project to host a public forum on the proposed Indiana Property Tax Constitutional Amendment. State Senator John Broden provided background on the amendment; local government and school system officials joined with community members to discuss possible consequences of its insertion into the State Constitution.

2. **Discussion at membership meetings** addressed a wide variety of topics: the future of small farms, mortgage foreclosure scams, the 2010 Census, federal financial reform, and an August meeting where representatives of the Coalition for Responsible Tax Abatement addressed the topic "Why does the Tax Abatement Ordinance have broad community support?"

3. Last March, we held the **Fifth Annual Community Forum on Economic Development** at IUSB. Speakers and workshops addressed a variety of issues related to jobs, justice and equity. Over forty community, labor, faith-based and business organizations co-sponsored the event.

B. Public policies that promote local economic development

1. We continued to focus on the need for **development in economically distressed neighborhoods**, such as the West Side neighborhood near LaSalle Square.
 - The Community Forum is represented on the LaSalle Square Steering Committee, a group of residents and other stakeholders working for the implementation of the LaSalle Square Redevelopment Plan, developed in 2008 with significant public involvement.
 - We monitor the biweekly meetings of South Bend's Redevelopment Commission, which oversees South Bend's TIFs districts; LaSalle Square is located within the Airport TIF.
 - Most recently we joined with organizations and individuals working to save the LaSalle Branch Library from closing due to current budgetary shortfalls. With the Lincoln Way West Gateway Association, we helped to organize broad community support for the survival of the LaSalle Branch.
 - Finally, members of the Community Forum have helped to establish and maintain the Urban Garden Market, an open-air farmers market at LaSalle Square, an area surrounded

by a "food desert" -- plenty of fast food restaurants but no grocery store with fresh produce.

2. We have promoted the **use of property tax abatements** only when significant public benefits can be documented. We initiated the Coalition for Responsible Tax Abatement, composed of sixteen labor and community organizations.

During the past year, the Coalition shifted its focus from the successful campaign to strengthen the St. Joseph County Tax Abatement Ordinance, adopted in May 2009, to support for a similarly strengthened ordinance in the City of South Bend. The Coalition supports Bill 25-10, currently under consideration by the South Bend Common Council. Bill 25-10, and a counterproposal, Bill 61-10, written by Project Future Director Pat McMahon, are scheduled for a public hearing and vote by the Council on November 8, 2010.

C. Programs that improve economic opportunities and overall quality of life

1. The Community Forum is a member of the **Tri-county Tax Team (TTT)**, a collaborative effort of the IRS, the United Way, and more than 20 organizations and institutions in St. Joseph, Elkhart, and Marshall Counties. As a part of the IRS's VITA (Volunteer Income Tax Assistance) program, last year we assisted 1400 low to moderate income residents of the three county area by providing free, electronic income tax-preparation as an alternative to exploitative rapid refund loans and expensive commercial tax preparers. Our goal was to capture available financial assets for families most in need of the tax credits available to them, resulting in additional financial resources for our community.

2. We partner with other community organizations to sponsor **Money Smart Week**, a program of classes and activities designed to help consumers better manage their personal finances.

3. One outcome of our March Forum was the formation of **CASE, Community Action to Support Education**, an initiative of the CFED and the NAACP. In November, "I Can Make a Difference" parent training sessions will be held at the LaSalle Branch Library for parents of children, ages birth to 5.

4. We also are represented on the **Community Education Impact Committee (CEIC)**, a large group of educators, business representatives, elected officials and community members who meet monthly to explore ways to improve public education. This group, which was convened by the United Way of St. Joseph County, was formed to engage the local community in making sure that each child has the opportunity for educational success.

D. Plans for the future

Last November, we were newly incorporated. We will soon become a 501(c)3. We have identified several organizational goals for the coming year.

1. In order to be a sustainable change agent in our community, we must move from being a 100% volunteer organization to one that combines wide community involvement with one or more staff members to carry out some of our growing daily tasks.

2. We need to strengthen our committee structure, establishing a variety of ways that individuals can contribute according to their time, abilities and interests.

3. We have seen the value of collaboration with other organizations, and will continue to emphasize this collaboration on issues and projects of common concern.