



Crowd 300-strong packs urban forum

Evan Brandt- Sunday, June 11, 2010

POTTSTOWN — More than 300 people packed into the community room at Montgomery County Community College Thursday night to rally around those who want county, state and federal governments to reinvest in existing communities in Southeast Pennsylvania.

There as part of a forum held by the First Suburbs advocacy group, representatives from Coatesville to Yeadon, Pottstown to Norristown, joined with those representing Hispanics, African-Americans, schools, churches, workers and civic organizations in putting elected and appointed government officials on the spot and on notice that these towns will not be left behind any longer.

First Suburbs focuses on what it sees as three crucial issues facing the communities that built America — they are crumbling infrastructure, fair housing policies and fair funding for education.

Speaker after speaker highlighted the inequities that grew when "our towns and old-fashioned designs fell out of favor," as the Rev. Ed Crenshaw of Victory Christian Fellowship in Norristown described it.

"We screwed up a good thing," echoed North Coventry Supervisors Chairman Andy Paravis.

Noting that abandoning these towns means abandoning the "millions of dollars in previous investments going to waste," Crenshaw said "we are here to demand that our communities become a priority."

"We need to challenge the wasteful federal and state funding priorities and fund our towns where people

can live greener lifestyles," said Norristown Council President William Caldwell.

Over the past decades, federal, state and county policies have allowed ex-urb communities to "zone out the poor, fostering deep pockets of poverty" in towns like Pottstown and Norristown, Caldwell said.

Ted Reed, interim city manager in Coatesville, said although Chester County is the 14th richest county in the United States and the richest in Pennsylvania, fully 51 percent of all Section 8 housing vouchers are deployed in the 1.6 square miles that delineate Coatesville.

"We don't begrudge those people at all, they need a place to live, but we also have a need for fairness," Reed said.

Similarly, Montgomery County has 62 municipalities and 480 square miles "but the vast majority of Section 8 housing is located in just two communities — Norristown and Pottstown," said Lana Shells, president of the Norristown NAACP.

"There is something wrong here," she said to enthusiastic applause. "We have to take the pressure off these communities where there is too much affordable housing and reform the system to increase market rate housing to these towns and have more affordable housing in the suburbs where it is dramatically lacking."

Paravis said the crumbling infrastructure in places like Pottstown were installed in the 19th and early 20th century, but the cost of replacing them now "is beyond the capacity of the people of Pottstown to pay. So they deal with it one emergency at a time," he said.

The state's primary re-investment agency, known as PennVEST, has a skewed scoring system for applications for state money favoring newer, more affluent communities, said Paravis.

The state should require that 65 percent of PennVEST's available funding be devoted in the next 20 years "to reinvestment in our established communities," Paravis said.

In these established communities, the "first suburbs" of Pennsylvania's major cities, the cost of funding education through property taxes continues to put an increasing burden on those least able to pay," said Reed Lindley, who next month will take the helm as superintendent of the Pottstown School District.

In this cycle, which requires cost-conscious school boards to cut spending — as Pottstown did this year cutting 11 teachers — programs will suffer and educational quality will diminish, Lindley said.

"And the people of Pottstown will pay more and rightly feel they are getting less for their money," he said.

As all of these issues were highlighted, the state and county officials who represent these communities were asked to stand and pledge their support for initiatives which will address these issues.

All said "yes."

And now, said Norristown Councilman Marlon Milner, all that remains will be to hold them accountable.