



# First Suburbs aims to make certain no town is left behind

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An air of "mad as hell and not going to take it anymore" pervaded at Montgomery County Community College Thursday night in a public meeting of the First Suburbs project.

Three hundred people representing communities from Yeadon, Delaware County, to Coatesville to Norristown to Pottstown filled the community college meeting room with presence and a sense of purpose.

Speaker after speaker described the hardships their towns are facing as the "first suburbs" — the oldest, most deteriorating, economically distressed and poorest of the towns and townships surrounding cities.

First Suburbs is an advocacy coalition that brings together representatives of civic, faith, community and education organizations seeking a higher notch in government spending priorities.

The group that gathered Thursday was made up of church leaders, local officials, Hispanics, African-Americans, school leaders and civic organizers. All demanded that the problems in America's towns be addressed, especially here in southeastern Pennsylvania.

Those addressing the group 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.

Crenshaw added: "We are here to demand that our communities become a priority."

Like a lion waking from a deep sleep, the group displayed an unmistakable power in the face of government policy and priority.

The number of people — 300 on a pleasant June evening, some traveling an hour to get here — and the power of their voices demonstrated a force to be reckoned with.

It is no wonder. The Brookings Institution national think tank estimates that fully one-fifth of the U.S. population lives in first suburbs. They represent a population fed up with high taxes and deteriorating neighborhoods that give them an unfair advantage next to wealthier neighborhoods nearby.

Education spending offers one example. In the established communities which are 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," testified 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, programs will suffer and educational quality will diminish. People will pay more and get less, leaving them behind as others move ahead.

One fifth of the nation is simply too much to leave behind.

County, state and federal elected officials — even representatives of both candidates for governor — were asked to stand at the meeting in response to the group's call for action.

They were asked to stand in accountability and answer with votes, not just words, on the three fronts where First Suburbs is seeking change: equity in education funding, aid in bringing infrastructure up to date and fairer distribution of housing diversity.

Now all that remains is to hold those in power accountable, a Norristown councilman noted Thursday.

If the spirit of challenge and involvement in the room Thursday was any indication, First Suburbs is on the way to getting results and refusing to be left behind.