

Discussing how to improve future of ‘First Suburbs’

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EAST NORRITON — The Thursday night screening of two short documentaries on the woes and potential solutions for First Suburbs outside metropolitan areas had the flavor of a tent revival meeting and political rally.

About 75 local officials, church leaders and community organizers gathered at East Norriton Middle School to watch two PBS documentaries titled “A New Metropolis” by filmmaker Andrea Torrice. The documentaries will air this fall on WHYY.

The group talked about the need for community action to revive suburban communities that have been drained financially by out-migration to more distant suburbs. “First Suburbs” refers to the first suburbs outside a metropolitan area.

Lynn Cummings, one of the central figures in a documentary about Pennsauken, N.J., spoke briefly after the one-hour screening.

“What is the difference between diversity and intentional integration?” Cummings asked rhetorically. “It’s the balance of power.”

Cummings organized her neighbors in Pennsauken to actively recruit white families to the changing Pennsauken to balance a diverse mix of ethnic families, she said. Pennsauken was first populated by white families moving from multi-ethnic Philadelphia and Camden, N.J. after World War II. Upwardly mobile white families later moved further into suburban New Jersey.

An empowerment project in Pennsauken involved leadership training for minorities financed by two, \$40,000 Dodge Foundation grants. The training encouraged minority residents to seek and win places in Pennsauken’s government council and school board.

“It is important for me to see so many people in this room,” Cummings said, “because when I started I could only get seven people to come to my living room.”

Norristown councilman Gary Simpson said “creating jobs will bring back residents” to Norristown.

“This is where the fight begins. This thing is really that important,” Simpson said. “As a group we have a lot of voices, and you have a vote. If they (leaders) are not listening to you, you can vote them out.”

Norristown councilman William Caldwell said Norristown was proud to be a member of the First Suburbs project. Council recently committed to spending \$1,000 in 2010 for its membership.

“We see the power of diversity,” Caldwell said.

Don Clark, president of the NAACP of Willow Grove, said the community had “lost the value of trust.”

“We must create a coherent community,” Clark said, “and then we can celebrate.”

Norristown councilwoman Linda Christian said Norristown changing demographics had “a little twist to the change” compared to Pennsauken’s white flight.

“Both Pennsauken and Norristown lost white residents,” she said. “In Norristown, realtors made single-family homes into multiple apartments, which provided the same property taxes for a larger number of residents.”

“This affects the school district and the earned income tax distribution,” Christian said. “I’m excited about the First Suburbs program.

Michael Golden, a Jenkintown borough council member, said the diverse communities in the Philadelphia suburbs can unite around their “common goals, values and opportunities.”

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