The Brown Grove Empowerment and Strategic Planning Retreat

November 6-7, 2021
As efforts are launched at the Federal level to recognize and redress generations of harmful industrialization and highway design that divided Black communities across the US, the African American Redress Network (AARN) and the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) joined efforts to support this work on a very local level, with the Brown Grove Preservation Group. On November 6th and 7th, 2021, AARN and ICTJ hosted a two-day retreat in the community of Brown Grove, Virginia. As a historic community facing multiple threats to its sustainability, the goal of this retreat was to open a space for residents of Brown Grove to come together as a community, reflect on what they want for their community and to develop a road map for how to get there. The Brown Grove Preservation Group and members of the community engaged in reflection on their community history and the work they have done thus far.
Brown Grove, Virginia is a predominantly Black community that was settled by free slaves. Their land has been and continues to be threatened by private industrial development. This includes the displacement of homes and land, the divide of the community by interstate 95, the construction of a concrete plant, local airport expansion, and the building of a truck stop. With the prioritization of industry, community members mentioned the lack of sidewalks, walking trails, playground, parks, and bike paths. As one community noted, the lack of community resources immediately stops upon the territorial beginning of the whiter area of town. The attempted erasure of historic black communities is part of a national pattern of environmental injustice where development projects have been used to divide and weaken communities of color across the United States.
“Brown Grove’s history is a microcosm of Black American History” – Historian Dr. Watts
Brown Grove is currently facing its biggest threat to date: a 1.1 million square foot Wegmans distribution center being constructed in the center of its Black heritage lands, family burial sites, churches, homes, a Black-only School archaeological site. The project poses a threat to this historic community’s land and cemeraries and is a major threat to air, water, and noise pollution as well as road and the general safety of community members. This project would also destroy protected wetlands. The Brown Grove community is fighting to preserve their health, historic places, and way of life.
The two-day retreat with community members and outside organizations sought to address the complex Wegmans issue and to center community principles in their organizational structure. The retreat focused on uniting the community in their efforts, developing a clear vision of their goals, and on capacity building. Instrumental to the success of the retreat were members of AARN’s Virginia Reparations Coalition who provided additional support and expertise.
The Brown Grove community has been operating in a largely reactive mode, not having the time to develop a clear vision and strategy for their community. A core element of the retreat was to step back and see the community’s struggle in the larger context of systemic injustice in the US and how their work can link to calls for acknowledgement of historical harm and reparative justice. The first day focused on bringing to light the family histories that are the foundation of the Brown Grove community, including the sharing of family artifacts. ICTJ’s Virginie Ladisch led a discussion on transitional justice and how to frame Brown Grove’s work as seeking acknowledgement for historical harm, linking it to the global and national conversation on redress and reparative justice. This was followed by a presentation on the specific history of Brown Grove as a swamp community established by freed slaves by AARN’s Billi Wilkerson and Professor Watts.
The second day focused on providing the Brown Group Preservation Group the tools and support to advance their efforts. They drafted up the principles that guide their work, identified the skills and expertise they have internally, ICTJ’s Evan Dembkowski walked through how to undertake a stakeholder analysis, and then we invited in a few external organizations that are committed to supporting Brown Grove in their efforts. Each organization filled out a survey ahead of time stating what expertise they can bring and how much time they can dedicate to this work. Instrumental to the success of the retreat were members of AARN’s Virginia Reparations Coalition who provided additional support and expertise. Members of the Coalition included Resolutions Addressing Systemic Racism (RASR), the Chesapeake Climate Action Network, Sunrise Richmond Virginia, and the Virginia Environmental Justice Collaborative.
The retreat ended with a community celebration with a meal and live music with the goal of uplifting the community and highlighting the support they have from outside organizations. Community members noted the contextualizing of their community helped to give them renewed pride and momentum for this work. 100% of participants noted an increase in the understanding “of transitional justice and how that framework can apply to our work.”

“We want the Brown Grove Community to be comfortable. Coming together to fellowship and work together.”
- Deshanda

“We want the community to know we are relevant. We have a voice and our voices should remain LOUD even beyond Wegman’s.
-Fawn
The community and Brown Grove Preservation Group will continue to protect their community against the negative impact of Wegman’s distribution center, but beyond that, they are unified in their commitment to advocate for the preservation and sustainable development of their community for future generations. This includes looking into rezoning the land around their community to residential, raising awareness among the community of the health hazards associated with industrial development, and mobilizing greater support to advocate for their rights and their land to be protected. Ultimately, The Brown Grove Preservation Group defined their future—laying out their visions for all that is to come.