

Community engagement next for reparations plan in Amherst

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November 22, 2021



By SCOTT MERZBACH

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Monday, November 22, 2021

AMHERST — Before Amherst establishes a plan for offering some form of reparations to residents of African heritage, as a means of ending structural racism and achieving racial equity for Black residents, extensive community engagement is expected to begin in early 2022.

The African Heritage Reparation Assembly, which has been meeting for several weeks as it prepares a plan to meet Town Council objectives for a more just and equitable town, released its initial report this week that emphasizes continued discussions with residents before any reparations program is established and money spent.

“A key to our success here is going to be our community engagement, with the broadest sense of community you can imagine for this work,” said Jamileh Jemison, co-chairwoman of the reparation assembly.

The community engagement is necessary, Jemison said, so that the reparations plan is satisfying to the whole community. Jemison said three to four months of outreach will likely begin by February 2022 that will include cultural events and other programs.

Also critical, Jemison said, will be executing a Black census that will look at the past and present, and projecting for the future, to determine the eligibility criteria for reparations. Jemison added that this will go hand in hand with what funds are available, finding all the ways needed to imagine reparations taking place, and the municipal and community bodies that will guide the work.

Amherst has modeled its reparations after Evanston, Illinois, which this year has qualifying households receive up to \$25,000 for down payments or home repairs.

While the Town Council approved establishing a reparations fund in June, no money is yet available, though a current plan is for transferring money into the fund at the Nov. 22 meeting. The certified free cash amount from fiscal year 2021 is \$206,000 and this could be set aside at that time.

The assembly group is also looking at other avenues for building the fund, including revenue from cannabis sales in town, the Community Preservation Act account and American Rescue Plan Act money, along with private fundraising and grants, said Michele Miller, a councilor-elect for District 1 and co-chairwoman of the panel. Miller said there could be a CPA-like structure in which individuals or groups apply for planning and funding reparations projects.

A conversation with state Rep. Mindy Domb also has yielded a possible legislative process that could expand reparations beyond Amherst to other communities in Massachusetts.

The African Heritage Reparation Assembly will have a final report with recommendations brought to the Town Council in June 2022.

Miller said the hope is to develop a reparations plan that will benefit Black people who have faced hundreds of years of discrimination and injustice.

The initial report can be viewed at <https://www.amherstma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/58816/7a-AHRA-Report-with-attachments>.

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RESOLUTION SUPPORTING COMMUNITY REPARATIONS FOR BLACK DETROIT

By Council President Pro Tem Mary Sheffield

WHEREAS, Detroit City Council acknowledges that Black People have been systematically, continually and unjustly enslaved, unjustly segregated, unjustly incarcerated, denied housing through racist practices in the public land use arena as well as private realty markets, including redlining, steering, blockbusting, denial of mortgages, and gentrification, displaced and inadequately housed by government housing policies including discriminatory VA/FHA practices, urban renewal (i.e. Black Bottom and Paradise Valley), and a variety of local and federal “affordable” housing programs; and

WHEREAS, Detroit City Council affirms mass outpouring of public opinion that in the wake of the police killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and others, recognizes that a worldwide paradigm shift in racial attitudes has occurred. This prefigures a historic national reckoning around structural racism and related forms of systemic injustices that have shaped American history. These momentous events should call forth new forms of reparations for the centuries of human enslavement and post-emancipation systemic discrimination and racism that constitute United States history; and

WHEREAS, Black People have been consistently and widely impoverished by discriminatory wages paid in every sector of the economy, regardless of credentials and experience, based on property, income and wealth advantages of white supremacy rewarding white Americans for being white, and punishing black Americans descended from enslaved ancestors and devalued by many forms of rampant structural and systemic violence against Blacks, such as police misconduct and abuses continuing in the present day, among other unjust racial policies; and

WHEREAS, Detroit City Council on its own behalf, and on behalf of the City of Detroit, the City with the largest black majority per capita in the nation, particularly acknowledges its own history of racially-motivated policies and practices, apologizes for the damage this history has caused the City and our People, and declares that it stands against White Supremacy;

WHEREAS, The Detroit City Council strongly supports reparations for centuries of human enslavement and post-emancipation systemic discrimination and racism. The purpose of this resolution is to help establish processes, develop, and implement community reparations in Detroit for mass-historic unjust treatment of Detroit’s majority Black population; and

WHEREAS, Assuming and strongly supporting the successful overturning of Michigan’s state constitutional ban on any racial or other affirmative action (Art. I, Sec. 26), as declared by City Council’s previous resolution supporting affirmative action policies in July 2020, reparations have been prominent among protestors’ demands during historic demonstrations in the wake of the George Floyd killing; and