

Remarks for Barb Harris  
St. Louis County Equity Commission

Meeting on Wednesday, Sept. 29, 2021—Equity in Housing

Good evening. My name is Barbara Harris, and I am co-chair of the Racial Justice Committee of Women’s Voices Raised for Social Justice. I’m here tonight representing the committee’s Affordable Housing Task Force. We appreciate the chance to share our concerns and ideas with this panel; thank you for inviting us.

Women’s Voices is a volunteer-driven grassroots organization, with more than 500 members and over 1700 supporters who live in St. Louis City and throughout St. Louis County. We are an education and advocacy organization, and tonight we are here to advocate for equity and inclusion in housing throughout St. Louis County.

There is a landscape of inequity in housing throughout St. Louis County. Women’s Voices is particularly focused on “communities of opportunity,” that is, those municipalities where residents have easy access to good schools, healthcare, parks and recreation, shopping opportunities, and transportation. Many of these communities are found in the central corridor of St. Louis County, where many of our members live.

The Center for Civic Research and Innovation, an initiative of the St. Louis Community Foundation, has provided us with some data about

affordable housing in the central corridor. According to their research:

—Approximately 206,000 people reside in the 22 municipalities located in the central corridor of St. Louis County

—These municipalities are all majority White

—Only four municipalities (Maplewood, Olivette, Rock Hill and University City), have Black populations greater than 20 percent

—Residents of the central corridor are highly educated. In all but one municipality (Maplewood), more than half of the residents have a bachelor's degree or higher.

—An overwhelming majority of residents in the central corridor are white-collar workers employed in management, business and professional services.

—Just one third of the municipalities in the central corridor have more than 10 percent of their residents employed in service positions. This is a strong indicator that service industry employees are priced out of the area.

It is clear from this data that we have an enormous affordable housing gap in St. Louis County. Members of Women's Voices believe that people, if they choose, should be able to live close to where they work. But workers that we have recently deemed "essential" to keeping our communities healthy and safe —those who work in our grocery stores, restaurants, government offices, and in our hospitals,

nursing homes and schools—have been priced out of homes and apartments in the central corridor of St. Louis County where many of them work. For example,

—The salary of nursing assistants who work at a rehabilitation center in Kirkwood is \$12.81 per hour. The average monthly rent for an apartment in Kirkwood is \$1,190. The average price of a home in Kirkwood is \$401,200. Average Rents in Kirkwood are 58% of a Nursing Assistant's average monthly wage.

—In Clayton, the salary of teachers' aides is \$25,000 per year. The average monthly rent in Clayton is \$2,104 and the average price of a home is \$762,337. Average Rents in Clayton are 101% of a Teachers' Aide's average monthly wage.

According to the US Dept. of Housing and Development, individuals and families should spend no more than 30 percent of their income on housing; spending more makes them “housing cost burdened.” According to statistics from Empower Missouri, a state-wide non-profit, non-partisan health and housing advocacy group, the average minimum wage worker in Missouri can afford rents of approximately \$550 per month. There is a critical shortage of housing available for these residents, and they are forced to compete for places to live.

It doesn't have to be this way. We have created this system of inequity and exclusion; with decisions we have made and laws we have passed and opportunities we have ignored for decades. Members of Women's Voices suggest that the following ideas be thoughtfully considered by those who are drafting the county's plan for equity in housing:

—— First, acknowledge that St. Louis County and its municipalities continue to perpetuate the segregation of many of its white neighborhoods, by prohibiting construction of anything but single-family residential homes. The result of these biased policies is a total absence of duplexes, townhouses or apartments affordable to the many people who keep our communities running including educational support staff, firefighters, nurses' aides, medical technologists, EMTs, hotel and restaurant workers, and others who serve their communities but cannot afford to live in them.

——Second, support the St. Louis County Housing Authority by advocating for additional housing choice vouchers and working to educate landlords about the advantages of accepting these vouchers. This would allow those with vouchers to obtain housing in the private rental market.

——Third, explore and implement strategies that would require new housing developments that seek economic incentives or tax abatements to set aside a percentage of units for low-income families. (This strategy was adopted in Kansas City in January, 2021).

——Fourth, work to develop a healthy, robust Affordable Housing Trust Fund in St. Louis County. Explore the possibility of a county-wide two percent tax on all property sales, both residential and commercial, that total over \$1 million.

——Fifth, find ways to encourage public-private partnerships that will combine public housing with market-rate housing.

—Finally, perhaps the most challenging work will be to dismantle the “Not In My Back Yard” (NIMBY) culture. Until we all recognize that we depend on each other and that affordable housing is a human right, we will continue to experience the persistent social problems that interfere with our region’s growth and success.

As Richard Rothstein writes in his award-winning book, “The Color of Law:” *“We have created a caste system in this country, with African Americans kept exploited and geographically separate by racially explicit government policies. Although most of these policies are now off the books, they have never been remedied and their effects endure.”*

Thank you for the opportunity to speak at this meeting. Members of Women’s Voices are eager to work with all those who want to build equity in housing in St. Louis County.

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