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Hayti community seeks \$20M revitalization grant

6-8 minutes

DURHAM – Picture a community of hundreds of homes and businesses – all thriving, all bustling, all Black owned. That is what Henry McKoy envisions for Hayti, once home to Durham’s Black Wall Street. “We’ve seen the rise of Hayti. We’ve seen the decline of Hayti. Now, let’s see Hayti reborn,” said McKoy, director of Hayti Reborn: Durham Equity Project, an initiative to revitalize the once prosperous Black area of Durham.

Through Hayti Reborn, McKoy and a group of longtime Hayti residents and their descendants, who have a “vision of widely-shared economic prosperity,” are working to restore Hayti and Durham to its Black Wall Street stature. “Hayti Reborn is about community-oriented investors developing Hayti with community ownership. It’s about redevelopment of these properties by people in those communities, and, as they rise, those people’s income and livelihood rises as well,” said McKoy.

Hayti was named and fashioned after the French colony Haiti, the first independent country created by former slaves. During a recent presentation on Hayti Reborn, McKoy said at its height, Hayti was a unique entrepreneurial ecosystem. McKoy said when W.E.B. DuBois visited Durham in the early 1900s, he marveled at what he saw: a network of Black businessmen all working together to make products and provide services to meet each other’s needs; everything from lumber to build homes, mattresses, clothes, food, and jobs.

Anita Scott Neville, a lifelong Hayti resident, recalled how her father and other Black businessmen could walk into Mechanics and Farmers Bank, talk to the president about economic challenges they were facing, and come out with a check. “That’s how the community supported one another and that was vital in Pettigrew Street and Hayti being able to survive. There was a spirit of community and not competition because everybody helped each other to do and provide and get what they all needed to carry on,” she said.

Today, Hayti is the poorest area of the city, McKoy said. What happened? Highway 147 happened, McKoy said, explaining Hayti was destroyed when the Durham Freeway was built through it in the mid-1960s. He said Highway 147 not only destroyed businesses and houses, but the entire community economic ecosystem.

“Highway systems came right through the middle of Black communities, and Hayti was one of those Black communities. It destroyed hundreds of houses, hundreds of businesses that were never rebuilt. But, in order to understand what it really destroyed, we have to look closer. It destroyed individuals, families, homes, firms, organizations, and, most of all, institutions, which are the backbone of communities,” McKoy said.

McKoy highlighted other factors that contributed to the decline of Black Durham and demise of Hayti, including globalization, which pushed tobacco production overseas, urban renewal, and gentrification. McKoy said Black people were also left out of Durham's redevelopment phase from 2005-2020. Durham has one of the highest per capita incomes in the state and country, yet Black residents account for half of the people living in poverty, with Latinos accounting for another 20%, he said.

McKoy and his planning team have applied for a \$20 million grant through the W. K. Kellogg Foundation's Racial Equality 2030 initiative. The foundation will award \$90 million to support programs that promote racial equality by 2030 to coincide with the foundation's 100th anniversary. The Hayti proposal has made it to the semifinalists round in which 10 semifinalists will receive a \$1 million planning grant. McKoy said he will find out in September if Hayti Reborn is one of the 10 finalists. At that point, each of the 10 will be awarded \$1 million to further develop their plan, which then puts them in the running for either \$20 million or \$10 million. The winners will be announced next summer.

McKoy said revitalizing Hayti will take the combined efforts of public, private, and philanthropic sectors of the community. United Way of the Greater Triangle has pledged its support of the project, according to Nick Allen, chief program officer. Allen said United Way is committed to helping Hayti become the economic hub it once was.

"Every neighborhood has a history, stories of dreams and challenges, stories of strength and resilience in the face of injustice, an origin story and a story of rebirth. These stories are held and carried forward by the people most connected to the place. It is through this history, these stories, and, most important, the people that we find purpose in our steps today and a collective vision for the future," Allen said. "Rooted in these firm beliefs, United Way of the Greater Triangle is proud to partner with the Hayti community and Dr. Henry McKoy to see that Hayti is reborn in a way that centers justice, focuses on wealth creation, and eradicates both the symptoms and the root causes of racialized disinvestment."

McKoy said he has spent the past five years talking with residents, seniors, youth, church leaders, and businessowners. "What does the community want? Increased safety; quality, affordable housing; community success; a civic voice, they want the government to listen to them; investment equity; financial mobility, living wage jobs, and opportunity for advancement; geographic agency, not to get pushed out of the community; a successful Durham," he said.

As the project manager for community engagement, local entrepreneur Latasha Best Gaddy said: "Engaging the community is so important for this project because they are the ones that are rooted and living in the community. We want them to share what they see as their vision for the community. From an economic perspective, we want Black wealth to continue in this community and, as we have seen historically, the gap has definitely continued to increase, and we feel like this is an important way to close the wealth gap, and this is a way to really recycle those Black dollars back into our community. And I know that we're not going to be able to stop gentrification, but we can also be a part of it from

really having Black businesses and Black landowners to also be able to invest in their community.”

Comments

How can small black owned businesses become involved in the grant?

Posted on July 12, 2021