

**DOWNTOWN RACINE
SUN CITY, SISTER CITY
OR
GAZA ON LAKE MICHIGAN**

**A REPORT ON THE STATE OF
RACINE'S DOWNTOWN**

**SUBMITTED TO:
THE RACINE BRANCH
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR
THE ADVANCEMENT OF
COLORED PEOPLE:
RACINE BRANCH EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

INTRODUCTION

Since the mid 1990's the revitalization of Racine's downtown area has been a priority for the City Fathers. From the creation of special tax incentive packages, to the cities direct involvement in land development purchases and exchanges. The construction of semi-landmark structures, and anchor facilities centered around one world class attraction. The downtown area appears to combine existing city amenities with growing and developing expansion opportunities. The projected outlook for a new mixture of modern and futuristic development and property placement, signal a blue-skies view of downtown's future. Yet, with all perfectly manufactured plans involving "shining cities on the hill", the concerns and desire for involvement by the villagers at the bottom of the hill seems to always raise their not to welcome heads.

In the case before us, the "villagers" materialized in the form of marginal purchasers of entertainment venues. These entertainment venue's operators suddenly morphed into the representation of underlying social issues. More specifically, one main and over-bearing social issue is race, racism and the epic version of classism. A classic variation of "haves-us- the have not's."

Racine's welcoming face of downtown fuels not only the potential growth of the area, but it also allows for the compatible placement of developmental opportunities for natives and transplants alike. The "speed bump" that could dislocate the future's potential is the loud and constant claims of disenfranchisement based on race that prohibits growth for all who want to be stakeholders in this new version of downtown. All developments throughout the Midwest have diversity as its force multiplying growth engine. Racine's downtown is different in only one way; (Racine's downtown development) started behind others. Thus, it has further to go. This development coupled with the present economic climate, political forces both local and state-wide may not seem vulnerable to such minor charges of racist based exclusion, yet due more to the present political cycle and climate, the potential for a viral public exchange becomes a developmental deal-breaker. A prolonged back and forth keeping the issue alive and public, and at the same time not resolving the central issue: Can the engine of diversity further push the growth Racine's downtown for all?

ISSUES

Downtown's return from the brink encompassed a multitude of movement by a layer of active participants consisting of developers, real estate brokers, speculative buyers, and private and public planners. An almost invisible overlay of public input by hand chosen citizens added the veneer of community concerns, versus monetary dominance underscored by equally unseen local political forces. This once ghost town identity started through fits and starts, transforming the infrastructure of the "shinning city on the hill."

Instead of remaining a major traffic artery to the expressway out of town, that same artery started first to provide a few easy watering holes and gathering spots for both the professional and semi-professional. Rumors of large developments and the potential to duplicate the Kenosha Harbor experience led to the development of over-priced housing. Condos, Harbor Lofts, and potential vacation locations rose on one end. Redevelopment of the southern anchor with historic City benefactors allowed the middle of downtown to become a string of entertainment venues, eateries and variety shops.

The primary issue is larger than the proverbial elephant in the room; inclusion. Surrounded on three geographical sides by the largest pocket of poverty in the city, the central downtown area continued to be developed. As the development increased, local political forces recognized the area as the golden goose of recovery. Thus they (the city council) enveloped the area with political protection in the form of enhanced developmental involvement, while using the police department in incremental steps to provide physical protection to maintain a viable perimeter surrounding the downtown development. This resulted in exclusion being cemented in to the plan.

This exclusion's first manifestation came in the form of increased police presence in surrounding neighborhoods; using drug sites, group loitering and further perpetuation of the gang mythology. This allowed the increase in police presence, creating an effective buffer for the downtown development. Minorities and more specifically black males had no business within the zone of downtown development. Easy to identify, and easier to corral, the physical aspects of keeping the "unwashed" out had been addressed effectively. Minorities, specifically black males had no business in downtown. More importantly from the hours of 6 p.m. on, no minorities need apply downtown.

Although various community entities complained to the city council and the police department about the treatment of minorities, specifically black males who entered the downtown area after 6 p.m. (or between dusk and dawn), all complaints were found to be baseless, unfounded, or the treatment of this group was deemed justified. Unbeknownst to this group, the city council had

become the velvet glove with the police department being the iron fist within that glove. The furtherance of the reservation plantation concept was raised to a higher level as the downtown development grew.

In the mist of downtown's growth and the rise in complaints of police mistreatment, like the growth of any garden, the "fringes" started to grow. Entertainment venues of a second class nature started to grow along, the as of yet Sixth Street corridor. This area was not as prominently included in the overall developmental plan of downtown forces as of yet. Thus this area was allowed to mature to a point. Minorities were allowed to enter and entertain themselves throughout this area, yet, as certain elements of the present downtown grouping would claim; allowing large groups of minorities to gather, adding alcohol and the mixture ends in problems both minor and major. The working class establishment served this population. As problems increased, the powers in control brought legal pressure to bear. Not economically capable to resist this pressure, these establishments folded one by one. This is not to deny the violent troubles that resulted from these establishments. Fights, assaults, shooting and even murder all took place in these areas. These actions served the ideal purpose of closing these establishments, and added to the planning for further development into a yet untapped area of downtown, this where the developmental twist started to take place.

Like the tall dark stranger who rides into the middle of our favorite westerns, enter stage left. An acceptable group of minorities, specifically African Americans, well connected politically, flushed with cash, overflowing with business experience and operational savvy. Not too mention, offering a plan, at the time that seemed to fit what the downtown grouping wanted. The secondary aspect was the fact that the downtown grouping, along with the city council gained what they believed was a serious buffer to the rising voices concerning complaints of non-inclusion and racism.

So joining hands, the downtown grouping, the city council and the new entertainment venue operator, along with the police command ventured down the rabbit hole. Neither party believed what was to happen next. First, the operator was allowed to alter the originally offered plan. So desperate to quell the complaints of non-inclusion and racism, the downtown grouping, the city council and the police command never uttered a potentially disruptive word, for fear of losing all that could be potentially gained. It became a no-brainer; an African American venue, an operator with deep pockets, politically and socially well connected, and mainly, primarily the potential to blunt those voices complaining from outside the established perimeter shouting racism and non-inclusion. Use the power of appearance and keep the development moving.

No one thought that others would come. Like the age old saying about bugs: If you see one, there are more, and by different methods more appeared. A "slight hand" maneuver placed another African-American venue in the same

area. Then, out of the clear blue sky by way of doing something we all will do at least four times in our life, a mere move placed another minority venue within a rocks throw of ground zero. This perfect storm set in motion a chain of events that brought back both the updated political machinery, and a firmer grip and application of the iron fist within the velvet glove. Law enforcement both public and private provided both the spear and the tip for enforcement of public policy as established by the city council and a protective shield for developmental stakeholders in the downtown area. Different voices and interest started to raise the level of attention surrounding the various aspects of downtown. The decision was made to address these issues head on with force. The central theme of this decision was to allow the private police force to take the lead while using the public law enforcement to add legitimacy to any action while deflecting any complaints about the force initiation of or reaction to the identified group of participants. This of course did not go over well with this group, serving to raise the voices crying racism, being enforced by racist. Only this time these very same voices were/are being heard from the venue operators as well. These same "color-neutral" downtown stakeholders were starting to complain. They cried out against the occupation army used by Racine's downtown to limit, or cut-off customers based solely on the identifiable color of their skin.

They bemoaned the use of the Racine political machine to unfairly, and potentially unlawfully restrict their trade by the use of rules and restrictions not enforced on white establishments. Yet because of a combined lack of focus, African American political power, and the dis-unity found in the surrounding reservation style communities, the political powers in the form of the city council continued to support the occupation of that section of downtown by the use of political, legal and both public and private police forces. The message at the half-way point of the development was again clear: "no blacks or minorities wanted in downtown after dusk."

DOWNTOWN STAKEHOLDERS FIGHT BACK

It not being enough that the deck was so easily sacked against minorities and minority venue owners, the downtown stakeholders (owners of the various components which comprise downtown) came up with the usual white justifications for sending the army of occupation into certain areas of the city to control crime and potential criminal behavior. Yet, when the local NAACP balanced the number of complaints they received versus the actual factual data, the truth was uncovered. That truth being that both, downtown Racine shareholders, the city council, and the law enforcement administration both public and private had a bit of explaining to do...

- 1) **Crime:** (Rape, robbery, burglaries and murder)
Major Crime numbers show no increase in what is classified as major crimes for the entire downtown area since minority and African American entertainment vendors have operated in this area. Compared to other cities its size, Racine maintains average major crime numbers. Yet, since the inception of the minority and African-American entertainment venues, the police presence has tripled on shifts patrolling after dusk in these areas.

- 2) **Crime:** (Loitering, disorderly conduct, littering and traffic incidents)
A substantial increase in the number of these crimes has skyrocketed. With private police acting as bloodhounds, the duly appointed police are called hundreds of times for the most minor incidents. The incidents turn into arrest, or are blown into serious life-threatening altercations, all which have taken place on our city streets, but have been assigned the responsibility of the minority/black venue owner/operators.

The charging authority as it relates to the tickets issues has been flooded with baseless complaints. Yet, in an effort to reduce the number of charges, plea deals and charge dismissal have become the order of the day in municipal court.

- 3) **Traffic Congestion:**
Most of the patrons of these venues are mobile; therefore, they must park somewhere. In loading and unloading situations, double parking, a violation has occurred. Yet, upon investigation, no rise in parking related ticketing has taken place surrounding these venues since their opening. Yet, on any given night, you have more public and private police cars jamming these intersections than patrons. Traffic patterns would indicate that there is more unwarranted police traffic in this four block area than any other place in the city limits of Racine on any Thursday through Sunday night. A recent meeting with police authorities resulted in a pledge not to have such an unwarranted presence in this area

unless necessary. The private police force employed by downtown Racine's stakeholders undermined that agreement by simply upping the calls for assistance that continued the traffic flood of police cars in the area. Again, reinforcing this four block area as a potential war zone that needs heavy police occupation.

The list goes on. Yet when laid side by side with the non-minority entertainment venues in the area, these numbers and circumstances change, well like "night and day." White entertainment venues have no trouble with either the private or public police force in regards to any of the aforementioned areas. Yet, the same mixture assigned to blacks and minorities are relevant in these establishments.

- ❖ Shooting
- ❖ Stabbing
- ❖ Shots fired
- ❖ Loitering
- ❖ Traffic congestion
- ❖ Fights
- ❖ Major physical injuries
- ❖ Public Drunkenness

All take place in these same non-minority/black entertainment venues but there is no private or public law enforcement occupation of these areas at any time. The question seems to answer itself. Whites in the downtown area to eat, and drink and have social interaction and for the most part responsible citizenship is practiced by all. Yet there are more than "rare occasion" when police interaction is necessary. The question still remains, "why" is both public and private police response to these areas far more utilized than in other areas?

Public records show a lower than average number of citizen complaints filed in this area of downtown then the number filed in the area of the other four block area. The number of both public and private police calls is down by more than half in this area of downtown. Public records indicate that the police are called twice to three times more in the minority/black section of downtown than in the predominately white areas. Is this because those who partake of goods and services in the non-minority section of downtown are better at following the golden rule or is it something else?

To further underline the message of no blacks or minorities in downtown after dusk; check the public record and compare the number of white entertainment venues who have been called before the city council, and the number of non-whites. Included in this comparison should be the use of cameras both inside and out, security both inside and out, and the volume of patrons. These additional factors will better illustrate the unwritten rule of downtown after

dark than anything else that has been written. After investigation, and talks with both downtown officers and officials within the Racine Police Department, it has become clear to the NAACP that a good downtown Racine is viewed as a white downtown.

SUMMARY

As the oldest Civil Rights Organization in the Country, the NAACP is used to name calling here in Racine. We have become accustomed to being viewed as racist trouble makers. Yet the facts and public records bear this case out, notwithstanding name calling.

In recent weeks, the NAACP has met with the representatives of downtown and the police department. We have offered the offices of the NAACP to act as a fair and honest broker in an attempt to improve the image of an area where we as people of color seem not to be included. Our input into decision making as it affects the future of this city, and our offer of help, partnership and assistance has been mocked and scorned. We were clearly told that we were, and will never be "stakeholders" in the development of downtown or its operations. We were clearly told that the only status that we could ever obtain in the downtown area was "customer" and that any other status was not allowable to minority/black non-stakeholders.

We were assured by the representatives of those white stakeholders that both private and public police would continue their active harassment of those minorities/blacks entering the downtown area after dark. Not that these groups were not welcomed, but it was clearly conveyed that the police would not hold back using force to enforce the "order of downtown."

The information fed to the city council and the Racine police force by a force of rented police who have maintained a no-bid contract with downtown for ten years, further underpins the constant calls before the council of minority/black entertainment venue operators for the most petty violations. All of these factors either mixed together or taken separately, indicate a desire of downtown stakeholders to remain no more than modern day plantation owners, using slave catchers to do their bidding.

Racine, sad to report, and supported by available public records wants to and remains segregated. With the exception of one or two entertainment venues that recognize money as the only color, minorities/blacks be they patrons or owner/operators are not welcomed downtown Racine. They are not welcome to partake in the development of the "shining city on the hill", but forever destined to toil under the hill. Active movement of inclusion must be made by both sides, yet as equal tax payers (black and minorities) should be entitled to equal treatment. That treatment should not be based purely on the color of ones skin. Racial pride and the inherent right to free expression be it music or dress should not be the price for that inclusion. That inclusion should not cost more for the minority/black, then for the white citizens of Racine. If we do nothing else in common, we all, no matter the color must pay our taxes, taxes that

make us” stakeholders” too whether you like it or not. The local NAACP based on public records plan to take action in various forms. One of those forms will be to enter into conversation with the Wisconsin and U.S. Justice Departments based on what we view as the unequal treatment of black and minorities as it relates to the tax-payer based services; including but not limited to the use and direction of the Racine Police Department by private citizen organizations and non-governmental entities. The purpose of these conversations is to make sure that constitutional protections are not being circumvented for a privileged few or turned into a mutant variation of Jim Crow laws.

The NAACP believes that constitutional protections should be extended to all citizens. If the available public records when reviewed by outside sources indicate that this is not the case, then the NAACP considers the matter closed. Yet, if as we suspect, the enforcement of public policy has been ceded to private forces with the approval of the present political machinery operating within the bounds of the law, then the city needs to step forth and explain “why” in only one segment of the city, is this practice allowed and condoned? Racine as a City, must come to grips with the minority population’s existence within in its boundaries. We must learn to co-exist together, or consign our city to a mode of non-growth or contemporary change.