

RESOLUTION
R-25-XX

A RESOLUTION ACKNOWLEDGING THE HISTORICAL CRIMES AND ONGOING INJURIES INFILCTED UPON BLACK RESIDENTS OF DECATUR, GEORGIA, AND ESTABLISHING A REPARATIONS TASK FORCE TO STUDY AND DEVELOP RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REDRESS

WHEREAS, the City of Decatur's 2020 Strategic Plan-Destination: 2030, which was adopted by the City Commission in October 2021, states that "Black people in Decatur have been unjustly enslaved, segregated, incarcerated, denied housing, displaced, while also facing redlining, blockbusting, and gentrification;" and

WHEREAS, the Strategic Plan recommends the establishment of a community-directed reparations task force to document the City's role in these injustices and address reparations; and

WHEREAS, at its March 4, 2024 regularly scheduled meeting, in response to a request from the Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights Reparations Committee Co-Chairs, the City Commission of the City of Decatur, Georgia unanimously authorized a contract for services with the Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights for reparations research work, the results of which are included below; and

WHEREAS, the historical research necessary to uncover the legacy of racial harm in the City of Decatur was made possible through the dedicated work of community members, student researchers from Georgia State University's Africana Studies Department and College of Law, organized and trained by Dr. Akinyele Umoja and Professor Natsu Saito respectively, Decatur High School's Black Student Union, and organizing partners who accessed the City archives and reviewed historical evidence; and this effort was facilitated in collaboration with City Commissioner Lesa Mayer and the Reparations Committee of the Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights; and

WHEREAS, the Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights organized a series of community gatherings and listening sessions at Lilly Hill Baptist Church to hear directly from historic residents of the Beacon Hill community—now elders—who lived through periods of segregation, displacement, and transformation, creating a sacred space for shared memory, healing, and truth-telling rooted in Black resilience and lived experience; and

WHEREAS, this collective endeavor was supported by the development of the Decatur People's History—a retelling of the city's past through the lived experiences and lens of those who had been systematically oppressed in Decatur—as part of a public education initiative

designed to provide critical context to the City of Decatur's 200th birthday commemoration; and this initiative was coordinated by the Decolonize Decatur Committee of the Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights, with oral history interviews and historical records from Beacon Hill elders facilitated by Mayor Emerita Elizabeth Wilson, and extensive research contributed by Decatur historian and DecaturHistory.com creator, Laurel Wilson; and

WHEREAS, the land that encompasses present-day Decatur, Georgia, was originally inhabited by the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, who were forcibly removed in the 1830s; subsequently, this land was cultivated through the labor of enslaved Africans; and

WHEREAS, from the city's founding in the 1820s through the Civil War, Decatur's economy and physical infrastructure relied upon the labor of enslaved Africans, whose unpaid work built roads, cleared land, maintained homes, and supported white prosperity; and

WHEREAS, the DeKalb County Courthouse that now serves as the DeKalb History Center in the City of Decatur is a later version of the first wooden courthouse built in 1823, is where the human trafficking of enslaved Africans occurred, on the first Tuesday of each month, all public sales and auctions took place including human beings; and

WHEREAS, the youngest person sold was a mere 20 days old. Between 1831 and 1863, nearly 500 enslaved Africans were sold on the steps of the Courthouse; and

WHEREAS, the first recorded African in Decatur, Georgia was an enslaved woman named Malinda who was offered for sale at the Courthouse in March of 1826 and again in September of 1827 for the debts of her enslaver; and

WHEREAS, the remains of some formerly enslaved persons—including Henry Oliver, a blacksmith and owner of Decatur's first Black business, and Sallie Thomas Durham and her husband Sylvester Durham are among the 900 people buried in Section 6 of the Decatur Cemetery, a segregated burial ground that offered no formal recognition in life or death, their names preserved only through local Black genealogical memory and the work of the Friends of Decatur Cemetery; and

WHEREAS, in Decatur, newly emancipated African Americans settled in what was known as "the Bottom." This square mile became the site of a "thriving African American community of homes, business, churches, and schools." By the early part of the 20th century, the area became known as "Beacon Hill" or just "Beacon." Almost immediately after the Civil War, African Americans in Decatur began empowering themselves through community organizing and institution building; and

WHEREAS, in 1882, Jethro Brooks, a resident of Decatur who was emancipated in his early twenties from enslavement, was among eight Black delegates from DeKalb County to the Georgia Republican Convention, highlighting the political activism and contributions of Black residents to the broader struggle for civil rights; and

WHEREAS, in the Beacon Hill community there were at least eight churches, all within four blocks of each other. These served as the “backbone of the community,” and included Antioch African Methodist Episcopal Church, Apostolic Holiness Church, Faith Tabernacle Baptist Church, Lilly Hill Baptist Church, Mount Zion Baptist Church, Thirkield Methodist Church, Trinity Presbyterian Church, and Thankful Baptist Church; and

WHEREAS, the Antioch AME Church was founded in 1868 in the home of a formerly enslaved Decatur resident, Austin Bratcher, and his wife, Louise McCoy Bratcher; Antioch A.M.E. Church was more than a religious institution for the community of formerly enslaved Africans. It housed the community school, social events, political gatherings, benevolent and fraternal societies and was a central component in the formation of the Black community’s conception of freedom; twenty-seven segregation-related laws passed in Georgia between 1865 and 1958 were designed to replicate slavery in spite of the 13th Amendment, effectively stripping Black citizens of constitutional rights, suppressing their vote, and supporting convict labor; and

WHEREAS, after the abolition of slavery, the City of Decatur continued the subjugation of Black men and boys, disproportionately arresting them under vagrancy and other frivolous laws and forcing them to build city infrastructure pursuant to criminal sentences; and

WHEREAS, after the Civil War, Mary Gay, a prominent resident of Decatur, was active in the work to preserve Confederate battlefields, raised money for monuments and cemeteries, and helped organize a local chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy; and the Junior League of DeKalb County currently operates what was previously known as the Mary Gay House; and

WHEREAS, Agnes Scott College located in the City of Decatur was funded by a Florida plantation owner and owner of enslaved persons, Lt. Col. George Washington Scott. Named after Scott’s mother, Agnes Scott was organized in 1889 by members of Decatur Presbyterian Church, and the school’s original mascot was a caricature of an African woman, Hottentot; and

WHEREAS, in 1906, the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) installed a cannon in Decatur Square, purportedly a relic of the so called “1836 Creek War”, symbolizing the genocidal removal of Indigenous peoples; and

WHEREAS, two years after the Atlanta 1906 Race Massacre, the United Daughters of the Confederacy placed a Confederate Monument in the form of a 30-foot obelisk in front of the Courthouse supporting the Lost Cause narrative which glorifies the false claims that the Civil War was a noble war fought for “states’ rights” and not slavery; and

WHEREAS, in 1915, Decatur enacted a racial zoning ordinance, and in 1938, prohibited Black and white residents from living under the same roof unless in servitude, institutionalizing residential segregation; and

WHEREAS, City of Decatur ordinances were used to legally restrict African Americans from living in any neighborhood in the City of Decatur outside of the Beacon Hill Community, City ordinances were also used to restrict the freedom of movement of African Americans in the “all white” neighborhoods in the City of Decatur; and

WHEREAS, in the 1930s, Home Owners Loan Corporation redlining maps classified Decatur’s Black neighborhoods as “hazardous,” and local banks—including Citizens & Southern National Bank, Decatur Federal Savings & Loan, and Georgia Savings Bank—denied federally insured loans to Black families, blocking wealth accumulation; and

WHEREAS, records show that by the 1940s, these loan qualification maps marked the entire Beacon Hill area in red, noting “Negro encroachment” as a disqualifying factor. These maps were later used to determine school zones and reinforce segregation; and

WHEREAS, residents of Electric Avenue, McDonough Street, Wheat Street, Water Street, Water Place, and Robin Street were denied city services well into the 1970s—lacking trash collection, paved roads and sidewalks, and clean water access—despite paying taxes; and

WHEREAS, through urban renewal in 1941, homes owned by African Americans were seized and sold to build the segregated Allen Wilson Terrace Apartments by the U.S. Housing Authority thereby eliminating intergenerational wealth in the Black community; and

WHEREAS, Black citizens of Decatur organized the Decatur Colored Citizen League in 1950 and the DeKalb Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1955; and

WHEREAS, on June 28, 1955, representatives of the Decatur Colored Citizen League, including President William H. Simmons and Secretary John H. Shanks, appeared before the Decatur City Commission to advocate for improved housing conditions for Black residents, highlighting the overcrowded and substandard living conditions caused by urban displacement and lack of affordable housing; this act of civic engagement reflected a sustained commitment by Black Decaturites to demand equitable treatment, public investment, and dignity in the face of systemic oppression; and

WHEREAS, Attorney James R. Venable, a former Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan and founder of the National Knights, maintained his law office in the heart of downtown Decatur, in the Masonic Building, and routinely defended white supremacists while using his legal and political influence to promote Klan ideology and racial terror; and

WHEREAS, the Venable family-owned Stone Mountain, where they promoted the construction of the world’s largest Confederate monument, transforming the mountain into a national shrine of white supremacy, and used it as a gathering site for Klan rallies and acts of racial intimidation; and

WHEREAS, the persistent and visible presence of a Klan leader operating freely within the City of Decatur, along with the looming symbolism of Stone Mountain under Venable family control, fostered a pervasive climate of racial oppression, psychological terror, and chronic fear among Black residents, contributing to the trauma, marginalization, and mental strain experienced by generations of Decatur's Black community; and

WHEREAS, on May 28, 1960, members of the Ku Klux Klan in full regalia, paraded through the Beacon Hill community and held a rally at the DeKalb County Courthouse, both public spaces under the authority of the City of Decatur, employing racial terror as a tool to intimidate Black residents, suppress demands for civil rights, and reinforce a racially discriminatory social order, with city officials taking no effective action to prevent or condemn these acts; and

WHEREAS, the City of Decatur's past pattern of inaction in the face of white supremacist terrorism, combined with its broader historic discriminatory practices—including the systematic exclusion of African Americans from public office, the displacement of Black neighborhoods and businesses under the guise of urban renewal, and the maintenance of racially segregated public services—constituted municipal complicity in upholding a racially oppressive regime, the effects of which caused intergenerational harm and structural inequality that persist to this day; and

WHEREAS, for much of Decatur's history, African Americans were systematically denied the opportunity to participate fully in civic life, barred from holding elected office, serving on public commissions, or occupying leadership roles in municipal governance, despite the active engagement, leadership, and advocacy of Black community leaders; and

WHEREAS, in a powerful act of solidarity with the Beacon Hill community's ongoing fight for justice, Jackie Robinson—the legendary athlete who broke Major League Baseball's color line—visited Decatur in 1961 and spoke at Thankful Baptist Church, lending his national platform to support local civil rights efforts; and

WHEREAS, the "Decatur Housing Study of 1964," identified McDonough Street and Campbell Street—major residential streets in the Black community—as "underutilized," recommending their clearance for "municipal use," including the construction of the Decatur Police Station, Fire Station, and City Schools offices; and

WHEREAS, in 1964, African American homes, businesses, and churches were demolished in the second wave of urban renewal in the City of Decatur; and

WHEREAS, the Decatur Housing Authority was designated by the City of Decatur as its agent to carry out urban renewal activities known as—Beacon Hill Projects No. 1 and 2; and

WHEREAS, Decatur High School and its campus were built as a result of urban renewal under Beacon Hill Project 1, and Beacon Hill Project 2 provided DeKalb County with sites for a new Justice, Education and Administration Building, Health Building, and Parking Deck; and

WHEREAS, almost all of the homes destroyed in Decatur's urban renewal zones, were Black-owned: none of the displaced families were relocated within city limits, and most were offered compensation far below assessed land property values or were denied legal assistance to challenge the seizures; and

WHEREAS, the City Commission controlled the budget for the city school system and appointed School Board Members until the 80's and the Decatur School Board operated a segregated, dual school system until 1970. Black children were relegated to Herring Street Elementary and Trinity High School. Black teachers received lower pay, classrooms were overcrowded, and the schools were underfunded. For example, the 1966 spending per child at Herring Street was only 48% of that at the all-white Glennwood Elementary, despite equal or higher enrollment; and

WHEREAS, the historic Beacon Hill community fostered a thriving African-American business district, with entrepreneurial leaders such as Tom Steele, who operated Steele's Café and served as the first African-American board member of the Decatur Housing Authority; Archie and Dovie Clark, who ran Clark's Grocery providing first-class service to Black residents from the 1930s through the 1970s; and the operators of Cox Funeral Home, Rogers Cab Company, Bussey Florist, Williams Beauty Shop, and Tyler Funeral Home, among others; and

WHEREAS, these Black-owned businesses not only offered essential goods and services but also served as vital centers of community life, economic empowerment, and cultural pride in Beacon Hill during an era of pervasive segregation and racial exclusion; and

WHEREAS, the City of Decatur initiated urban renewal and redevelopment projects which resulted in the forced displacement, demolition, or relocation of many Beacon Hill businesses, severely undermining the economic foundations and social fabric of Decatur's AfricanAmerican community; and

WHEREAS, the loss of these businesses and community institutions caused lasting harm to generations of Black Decatur residents, erasing spaces of self-determination, entrepreneurship, and collective advancement built under conditions of systemic racial discrimination; and

WHEREAS, the community once known as the "Bottom" and "Beacon Hill" ceased to physically exist, and now the only evidence of it ever existing in the City of Decatur, is a historical marker, placards and street sign toppers; and

WHEREAS, there was no longer a neighborhood in the City of Decatur known as Beacon Hill that Black Decaturites could call home, some Black residents began moving into Oakhurst neighborhood when it became legally permissible; and

WHEREAS, Decatur Federal Savings and Loan Association, a prominent mortgage lender established in 1926, engaged in discriminatory lending practices by rejecting Black mortgage

applicants at nearly three times the rate of white applicants between 1988 and 1992, was charged with a broad pattern of racial discrimination; and

WHEREAS, the U.S. Department of Justice in its first federal redlining lawsuit, which resulted in a consent decree requiring Decatur Federal to provide \$1 million to affected Black applicants and to implement comprehensive reforms to its lending practices; and

WHEREAS, the Oakhurst neighborhood in Decatur, Georgia, historically served as a refuge for African American families displaced by mid-20th-century urban renewal projects in downtown Decatur and neighboring Atlanta, offering opportunities for homeownership and community building; and

WHEREAS, systemic practices such as redlining and racially restrictive covenants historically impeded African American access to housing and financial resources in Oakhurst, contributing to patterns of segregation and disinvestment; and

WHEREAS, beginning in the early 2000s, Oakhurst experienced significant gentrification, characterized by the demolition of over 120 homes, rising property values, and the construction of larger, more expensive residences, leading to the displacement of long-standing African American residents; and

WHEREAS, the demographic shifts resulting from gentrification have led to a substantial decrease in Oakhurst's African American population, altering the cultural and historical fabric of the community; and

WHEREAS, community initiatives such as Decatur Day have emerged as platforms for former and current residents to celebrate and reclaim African American history and culture in the face of ongoing displacement and marginalization; and

WHEREAS, it was not until 1984—161 years after Decatur's incorporation in 1823—that the city elected its first African American official, Elizabeth Wilson, breaking a longstanding pattern of exclusion; and

WHEREAS, the Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights and allied organizations in recent years, in the tradition of the Decatur Colored Citizen League, has documented and resisted these persistent injustices, calling on the City of Decatur to acknowledge its role and take meaningful steps toward structural redress; and

WHEREAS, in June 2020, amid nationwide protests against police brutality and systemic racism following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, and Ahmaud Arbery and after years of advocacy by community members and organizations including the Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights and Hate Free Decatur—DeKalb County with the support of the City of Decatur removed the Confederate Monument obelisk that had stood for over a century; and

WHEREAS, in September 2021, the Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights, in collaboration with Decatur Makers and Afrofuturist artist Ellex Swavoni, unveiled the bronze statue “What Sonia Said,” featuring a quote from Sonia Sanchez’s poem “Catch the Fire” and standing as a tribute to the strength, heroism, and resilience of the Beacon Hill Community; and

WHEREAS, in December 2020, following continued organizing and educational efforts led by local students, educators, and Black-led organizations, the City of Decatur passed a resolution in support of the removal the “genocidal cannon” from the Decatur Square which was the cannon installed by the UDC in 1906 glorifying the genocidal removal of Muscogee (Creek) Nation, and it was subsequently removed by DeKalb County in October 2021; and

WHEREAS, the 2001 Durban Declaration and Program of Action, adopted by the United Nations World Conference on Racism, recognized slavery and the slave trade as crimes against humanity, and that transatlantic slavery and colonialism remain among the root causes of contemporary forms of racism and racial discrimination; and

WHEREAS, on August 24, 2024, a 12-foot bronze statue of the late Congressman John Lewis titled Empathy, created by renowned Jamaican sculptor Basil Watson, honoring the Civil Rights legend, was unveiled in the Decatur Square on the precise location where the Confederate monument once stood, symbolically replacing a tribute to white supremacy with a beacon of unity, courage and moral clarity; and

WHEREAS, this City Commission affirms that providing redress for the historic crimes and ongoing harms and injuries illustrated by, but not limited to, the aforementioned examples requires more than public recognition—it requires a comprehensive examination of past and present policies, institutional complicity, and intergenerational harm, as well as action consistent with global reparations frameworks such as those recognized by the United Nations and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COMMISSION OF DECATUR, GEORGIA, THAT:

1. Formal Acknowledgment

The City of Decatur formally acknowledges its past role in the systemic oppression of people of African descent through enslavement, human trafficking, convict-labor, discriminatory zoning and development, underinvestment in African American communities, school segregation, racially biased policing, the destruction of African American-owned property, businesses, and institutions and the displacement and erasure of the Beacon Hill community, people and culture;

2. Public Apology

The City extends a full and public apology to the Black residents of Decatur—past and present—and their descendants, for its role in perpetuating discrimination, oppression, subjugation and the resulting harms, profiting from policies rooted in the system of white supremacy.

3. Creation of the Decatur Reparations Task Force

A Decatur Reparations Task Force shall be convened to:

- Compile records of Black land and property loss, economic displacement, legalized discrimination and expropriation, and labor exploitation;
- Interview descendants of those impacted and consult archival materials;
- Develop policy and programmatic recommendations to begin the process of redress, recognizing that addressing the harm done by historic crimes, the effects of which caused intergenerational harm and structural inequality that persist to this day, may require a wide range of remedial measures;
- Promote awareness of this history and the process of redress through engagement in public education, and in historical reckoning initiatives;
- Propose city-sponsored memorialization projects, economic equity tools, and investment strategies, and support community-based initiatives to address the racial disparities resulting from these historic crimes and ongoing harms.

4. Membership and Structure

The Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights will make recommendations for the community led Reparations Task Force which shall consist of:

- 3 residents with familial ties to the Beacon, Bottom, or Oakhurst communities;
- 2 members of the Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights;
- 2 historians with specialization in African-American or Southern urban history;
- 1 legal expert in civil rights and, human rights, international law, and reparations;
- 1 youth representative (under 25);
- 1 representative from the Decatur City Commission;
- 1 representative from Better Together Advisory Board

Within 60 days of receiving the recommendation of the Beacon Hill Alliance for Human Rights, the Decatur City Commission's Task Force Representative will appoint the membership of the Reparations Task Force. The same procedure will be followed should vacancies arise on the Reparations Task Force.

5. Timeline and Reporting

The Reparations Task Force shall hold its first meeting within 60 days of confirmation of at least 7-9 Task Force Members, issue public interim reports 12 months and 24 months thereafter, and a final report and recommendations within 36 months. These reports shall be archived and made accessible to the public through city and historical websites.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Decatur Reparations Task Force will continue to operate until full redress has been achieved or until the Task Force agrees by consensus to dissolve;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the City of Decatur will review, consider, and incorporate the recommendations of the Reparations Task Force into its policymaking, budgeting, and strategic planning processes and will work to ensure lasting change and material redress for its African American residents, past and present.

ADOPTED this ____ day of May, 2025.

CITY OF DECATUR, GEORGIA

(SEAL)

By: _____
Mayor

Attest: _____
City Clerk