

# **Obama's Organizing Beginnings Celebrated, Emil Jones Honored, Red Line Extension Demanded**

## **Developing Communities Project Commemorates 25 Years of Community Advocacy at Annual Convention**

By Laura Rice (November, 2012--Chicago, IL)

Developing Communities Project (DCP) triumphantly marked its silver anniversary with an energy-filled convention, Celebrating 25 Years of Community Transformation: Looking Back While Moving Forward at Allen Metropolitan C.M.E Church, 10946 S. Lowe in Chicago. Incorporated as a not-for-profit organization under the leadership of its first executive director, then community organizer and now President of the United States, Barack Obama in 1986, DCP remains church-based with the mission to improve the quality of life by training and empowering grassroots leaders to advocate for favorable public services and public policies for the families of Greater Roseland.

Attended by DCP member churches, elected politicians, community activists, youth, and seniors, the organization kicked off the celebration with two, dynamic workshops. The Economic Development workshop focused on the critical roles that transportation, transit oriented development, workforce development, housing and the environment play in the economic viability of the community. The panelists were Abraham Lacy, executive director, Far South Side Community Development Corporation; Janet Smith, PhD, co-director, Nathalie Voorhees Center for Neighborhood Improvement at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), and Robert Wordlaw, executive director, Chicago Jobs Council. Lou Turner, DCP public policy director & assistant director & assistant professor, African American Studies at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana facilitated the workshop.

The youth development workshop engaged panelists (Officer Ron Holt, director, Community Alternative Policing Program, Chicago Police Department; Dr. Shelby Wyatt, counselor, Kenwood HS; Tommy McTizic, Greater Roseland Safety Network Youth Leadership Council; and, Professor Ted Williams, Professor, Kennedy-King College) and audience members in a lively and urgent discussion on and action steps for violence prevention, education, leadership development, and parent engagement. DCP's Roseland Safety Net Works Coordinator and Project CONNECT Director Tiffany Hightower facilitated this timely round table.

Following a reception, attendees assembled in the church's sanctuary for the convention, which was opened by DCP board president Dr. Issac Floyd, pastor of Joy Fellowship Baptist Church. Mrs. Mamie Thomas, convention chair and DCP board

secretary, followed with a roll call delegates. Armed with posters demanding continued action around a greener, cleaner Roseland; literacy; an end to youth violence and mortgage foreclosures; voting; and the promise to extend the CTA Red Line, hundreds of conventioners heard powerful testimonies about DCP's core programs. Testimonials on Adult Literacy, Environmental Equity, Mortgage Foreclosure Prevention, Safety Net Works Coalition, Parent Leadership Action Network (PLAN), Project CONNECT, the Red Line Extension Campaign, and Project Vote II, DCP's grassroots voter registration initiative drew the congregation to its feet with Amens, applauses, and poster waving.

Conventioners were further moved as the First Annual Elder Eugene Taylor Award for Outstanding Social Justice Leadership was presented to Mrs. Hilda Taylor, Elder Taylor's widow by Phyllis Palmer, current ROC chair. The late Elder Taylor, chair of the Red Line Oversight Committee (ROC), tirelessly and prudently, led the Red Line Extension campaign for over six years.

In a somewhat unprecedented move, DCP presented Illinois Senate President Emeritus Emil Jones, Jr. with the First Annual Outstanding Honorable Emil Jones, Jr. Award for Advocacy for Social Justice Legislation for the Families of Greater Roseland. The award recognized his significant contributions to improving the lives of citizens in Roseland and the surrounding areas. DCP Vice President Rayford Grady, pastor of Lutheran Church of the Holy Spirit, presented the awarded to Jones who was joined by his son State Senator Emil Jones, III.

Jones, well known as Obama's political godfather, is credited for assisting DCP to secure its initial program funding and for helping DCP advance the organization's Red Line Extension campaign. Offering a bit of his and Obama's shared history, "I was there at the inception of DCP right down the street there...and there was this young brash guy demonstrating about dropouts at Fenger High School...I invited him [to come] down to my office...most folks come to you with problems... but DCP came in with the solutions...[their work] made me a better legislator." Continuing, Jones told conventioners about encouraging Obama to fulfill his desire to attend law school. Upon his post-law school Chicago return and after working with Jones on the first Project Vote, Obama came to Jones and said, "You have a lot of power. You have the power to make a U.S. senator." Jones replied, "That sounds good. Do you know any[one] I could make? An emphatic Obama said, "Me!" "The rest," said Jones, "is history."

Presidential Appointee and Regional Representative of the U.S. Department of Labor, Kenneth Bennett, brought greetings to the Convention from President Obama and reminded attendees that the journey to the White House "...began here, with DCP!" On behalf of the President, he encouraged DCP to continue to do its much needed work around community organizing, leadership development, job creation, and transportation equity, not just for greater Roseland community, not just for the City of Chicago but for the nation.

Congressman Bobby Rush's Communication Director and Emmy-Award winning, former NBC-5 Reporter Renee Ferguson delivered a profound social justice keynote address

on his behalf. Additional convention highlights include spirited musical selections from the Lilydale First Baptist Church choir.

#### RED LINE EXTENSION CALL TO ACTION

DCP Policy Director Lou Turner energized conventioners with an impassioned Call to Action. Turner began by outlining the CTA's nearly 40-year-history of unkept promises to extend the Red Line south to 130th Street. He proudly shared that until DCP began organizing around transportation equity 10 years ago that there were no real plans for the Red Line Extension. During this time, DCP's Red Line Oversight Committee produced comprehensive Red Line Extension feasibility studies that showed the tremendous need for and the positive economic impact the extension would have on disenfranchised communities on Chicago's far south side. DCP also brought large numbers of community members to CTA and ROC meetings. Both of these actions resulted in the CTA including the community response in its policy making process. Despite this policy change and the tremendous imperative need for the Red Line Extension, the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) has shifted its focus from extension to modernization and track replacement. Turner said, " Games are afoot in the City of Chicago to undermine, derail and marginalize this community with modernization all up and down the Red Line [while slowing down Extension plans]!"

Sharing that the \$1.2 billion Red Line Extension is the largest public works project in Chicago since the creation of the Dan Ryan Expressway, an insistent Turner said, "[This] is a jobs program, [a] public works program...a commercial and economic development program." He continued rallying the crowd with the reminder that Mayor Rahm Emanuel, giving notice to both the federal and state government, ran on a well-documented platform that positioned the Red Line Extension as his number one priority. "He's faded since then," an emphatic Turner said. Closing the Call to Action with the audience returning to its feet and waving posters demanding "EXTEND THE RED LINE, NOW!", Turner vowed "We remain vigilant with the CTA, we remain vigilant with all other public transportation agencies, we remain vigilant with the City of Chicago!"