

Tuesday Topics August 2, 2022

President Carole Jordan called the meeting to order and reminded Zoom viewers to stay muted and pose questions in the chat box. She announced our next meeting (September 6th) will be hybrid on Zoom and at the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library. Vicki Arnett is on the City of Topeka Redistricting Committee. She will keep us updated. Many league members are at the polling places today. Thanks to all of them and all the leaguers who are working on encouraging voters to register.

President Jordan introduced our speaker, Donna Rae Pearson, Local History Librarian at the Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library. Pearson's topic was "Redlining," which is defined as "denying access to credit, particularly mortgages based on the race of residents of a neighborhood." Six men designated neighborhoods A, B, C, or D based on race, income level, and lack of amenities. Seventy five percent were labeled "not worth investing in." In these redlined communities there are disparities with wealth, food security, health matters and education.

Topeka's back story includes the Civil Rights law, the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, Black and Mexican settlement in Topeka including Oakland, Tennessee Town, Mud Town near the Brown v. Board, and the Bottoms.

Harland Bartholomew was a city planner who initiated the direction of Topeka's growth and implemented the City Beautiful Movement. Topeka's first Comprehensive Plan included zones and streets. City planning helps define places and spaces. Next came the Home Owners Loan Association, schools, Federal Housing Association, Federal Home Loan Bank that approved homes and labeled home neighborhoods.

In the 1930s the Westwood Addition was designated a restricted area and targeted the 85% of Topekans who were whites. In 1945 the second Comprehensive Plan was implemented. Blacks lived in blighted neighborhoods. Mexicans lived with multiple generations in one household. The city's Health Board was 85% white.

At this time Urban Renewal began and included the 1949 and 1954 Housing Acts, Federal Highway Act, and U.S. Comprehensive Housing. The first plan was the Keyway Project that aimed to create a new and better downtown consisted of 37 blocks, of which 60% was residential. The Bottoms neighborhood and Black businesses in the 4th business district were torn down – 669 families were relocated. They were not fairly compensated, and the NAACP sued the city but lost.

The Highland Park-Pierce Project consisted of generational wealth. Families, whites (including Mexicans) and Blacks had a 50% chance of owning their own home. Pearson said Menninger was involved, but the project needs more research. Home ownership was tied to race: 9.8% white, 9.8% Mexican, 5.5% Black.

Social and physical determinants of health that started in the 1930s are ongoing today. Social determinants include neighbors, health and health care access, social and community context, education, and economic stability. Physical determinants include natural environment, built environment, presence of contaminants and physical barriers.

Pearson said things are getting a little better. Regarding health care, Pearson goes to Grace Med in her Tennessee Town neighborhood. She doesn't qualify for free care but pays to support Grace Med. She misses having a grocery store available in the neighborhood. Other areas of the city have more amenities such as grocery stores. Regarding downtown redevelopment, Pearson, who serves on several committees involved with downtown, said she has not seen any person of color ask for assistance.

Gretchen asked if loan rates are still tied to neighborhoods in Topeka and do covenants include exclusionary clauses. Pearson said she assumes the rates are tied to neighborhoods and said yes to the exclusionary clauses but not all are honored. Mary Galligan asked about the health map and City Council representation.

Does the map reflect the city's neighborhoods and how decisions are made? Pearson deferred to Michael Bell, president of the Tennessee Town NIA. Bell said there are 21 NIAs in Topeka mostly in low to moderate-income levels. Those located east of MacVicar are Black. He said the 1930s health map is a self-fulfilling prophecy of Redlining. He continued describing Tennessee Town that embraces its working-class neighborhood but is being penalized on health issues. Tennessee Town was rated "intensive care" and is now "majority at risk." There hasn't been an assessment of the health map. Orion asked if raising the minimum wage would have a positive impact. Pearson said it is essential. Orion also asked about Medicaid expansion. Pearson said it would help.

Having no more questions, President Jordan thanked Pearson and adjourned the meeting. For those who want more information, the recording of the Tuesday Topis is available on the library website.