

City backs reparations exploration 06/13/02

BY BOB SEIDENBERG

Evanston Review

Evanston will join other communities in the forefront of a movement to urge Congress to explore reparations to African-Americans for the injustices they suffered during and after slavery and after.

Residents broke out into applause Monday night after City Council members voted 7-0 in favor of the proposal, which calls upon Congress to establish a federal commission to study the issue.

Bennett Johnson, president of the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and others spoke in support of the resolution.

"We have a cancer on the body politic," Johnson said, recalling the injustices that he and other longtime citizens endured growing up in Evanston. "The resolution will help heal that wound."

Alderman Lionel Jean-Baptiste, 2nd Ward, sponsored the proposal. The idea was first proposed by a citizen, who said she received little interest initially when she brought up the idea.

Ra Joy, suburban director for U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th, read a message from the congresswoman commending Jean-Baptiste for sponsoring the issue.

"It has been difficult for our country to come to grips with the unspeakable cruelty and massive human suffering resulting from slavery," she said. "It is estimated that over four million Africans and their descendants were enslaved in the United States and its colonies from 1619 to 1865." Schakowsky said she is proud to be the co-sponsor of the bill introduced by U.S. Rep. John Conyers, D-Michigan, that would establish a commission to examine the institution of slavery and subsequent discrimination against African-Americans.

"I believe this study will help stimulate public dialogue of significant importance and assist our nation in coming to terms with this unprecedented tragedy."

Other speakers included Ayinde Jean-Baptiste, son of the alderman, and representatives of the academic community.

Iva Carruthers, a professor emeritus at Northeastern University, and president of the Urban Outreach Foundation, spoke of her own experiences growing up in Evanston.

She said the reparations issue is coming to terms with the past, and "it never, never can be reduced to just money."

Longtime activist Sidney Zwick said there was no doubt about the evils perpetrated through slavery on African-Americans.

He questioned, however, whether reparations were an appropriate remedy, arguing that the country "atoned for our sins" through the large loss of life during the Civil War.

Zwick, a retired history teacher, said officials would be better served to examine how to improve education and create greater job opportunities.

Evanston joins other cities, including Chicago, Baltimore and Dallas, as well as the state of California, in backing such a proposal.

Supporters of the measure also asked that there be an educational component, calling on Evanston's two school districts, as well as Northwestern University, to participate in an effort to

achieve a greater understanding of slavery.