Alert!

Highland Park Human Rights Coalition

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Highland Parkers have more water debt

On May 4th, over two dozen residents and other community members came together for a meeting of the Highland Park Human Rights Coalition. It had been over a year since the group last met. People were delighted to see familiar friends and neighbors. Residents Marian Kramer and William Akbar called the meeting to discuss water shut-offs in the city and get ideas and suggestions from Coalition members on how to stop the continuing crisis.

Several people reported that they are still receiving late water bills—some 6-12 months old—and others stated that many residents are finding their delinquent water bills attached to their property taxes. This tactic by Highland Park city officials causes homeowners to lose their homes due to liens against their property. City Council members at this meeting said that they are receiving fewer calls and complaints about water problems but other residents believe this is because homeowners are suffering in silence with their water bill problems.

Members of the City Council also reported that they have been conducting an internal investigation of the former State appointed Financial Manager, Ramona Pearson, and her consultant, Jan Lazar. During the nearly five years that they spent in Highland Park, they did not improve the City’s financial situation and, in fact, left residents with an additional $9 million in debt from loans that they used, mostly to cover their exorbitant salaries! One Council Member stated, “Instead of taking care of the bills and debt, they paid themselves.” Current officials have forwarded the matter to the Michigan State Attorney General with charges of fraud and have asked him to review the case and seek restitution or criminal charges against them. They added that people in Lansing are hoping this problem will go away. However, that’s not likely to happen. As Mrs. Kramer said, “Highland Parkers are long, strong people but we can’t let them get away with this!”

Guided by the spirit of Vallory Johnson, warrior and friend
Over a hundred people attended the first showing of the Highland Park-based film “The Water Front,” at Highland Park Community High School on May 11th. It is a documentary by filmmaker Liz Miller about the City’s water crisis. The film covers the story of residents across Highland Park as they struggle to understand why their water bills are so high, and the efforts undertaken by the former Financial Manager and her appointees, to collect on these bills. It follows the lives of several residents, especially the late Vallory Johnson, as they discuss the water situation with other homeowners and develop strategies to address the problem. But along the way, many residents find that their water was being shut off because they could not afford to pay the high bills. Water department employees also found themselves in difficult circumstances as they were forced to turn off water at the homes of neighbors and work in unsafe conditions at the Highland Park water plant.

Following the hour-long screening, viewers discussed their positive thoughts about the film and offered suggestions to the filmmaker about how to improve it before its television broadcast later this year. The next day, members of the Highland Park Human Rights Coalition met with local and national environmental groups to discuss how the film could be used to improve the situation in Highland Park, and educate others about this water crisis. The film will be shown a second time on Saturday, June 23, 2007 at Wayne State University in the McGregor Conference Center. The screening will take place from 5-6:30pm as part of the Allied Media Conference (www.amc2007.org).

Admission is free and parking is available near Cass & Ferry. You can check out the six minute film trailer called “Water Warriors” at http://www.mediathatmattersfest.org/6/water_warriors.