

## **Our Fight to Deconcentrate Poverty**

By Tom Barwin

If you have a few minutes this pre-Thanksgiving weekend, I would encourage you to Google the term “Concentrated Poverty”. For those who may not have the time, here is the Wikipedia definition:

“.... areas of concentrated poverty place additional burdens on poor families that live within them, beyond what the families own individual circumstances would dictate.....limiting economic potential and social cohesion.”

The Brookings Institute has documented that the “concentration of poverty results in higher crime rates, underperforming public schools, poor housing and health services, as well as limited access to private services and job opportunities.”

Most literature on this subject traces the roots of concentrated poverty to our country's unfortunate history and lingering effects of racial discrimination related to housing, education and employment. As a City Manager for 35 years who constantly reviews community data and history, I believe this is true.

As Sarasota's historically segregated community of Newtown has proudly celebrated its 100 year anniversary this year, the enthusiasm, optimism and commitment to progress and economic development has been palpable. Newtown and city leaders have been quietly and effectively making important strides over the past decade to break the bonds of concentrated poverty that engulf and frustrate so many minority communities across America. It's not an easy fight.

Space does not allow me to share all of the progress and many exciting initiatives currently underway but the recent investments to modernize housing at Janie's Garden, opening the well run Robert L. Taylor Community Center and rebuilding the new Booker High School are paying dividends and have lifted community spirits. These important investments have begun to stimulate private sector investment. The vision of restoring Newtown's once functional and vibrant main street, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Way, is within reach.

As momentum builds, Sarasota and Newtown are poised to do something over the next decade that few communities have accomplished. Overcoming historic geographic poverty by, with, and for the people living within its reaches is an attainable goal our community is committed to achieving.

The first rule to the formula of breaking the cycle of concentrated poverty is similar to a guiding principle for physicians “first, do no harm.”

Why is this important? It explains the strong and legitimate community reaction to the plan announced this week by Sarasota County to place a 250 bed, 24/7/365, “come-and-go-as-you-are”, jail diversion facility on Myrtle Street near the Robert L. Taylor Community Center at Myrtle and 301. We anticipate 50 beds for homeless and 200 beds for offenders.

As the City and Newtown strive to overcome the seemingly intractable challenge of concentrated poverty, permanently adding 250 of the region's most challenging health and socio-economic cases to Sarasota neighborhoods is perceived at best to be yet another example of governmental indifference.

Policies that place extraordinary burdens and pressures on poor areas keep poor neighborhoods poor. This example is especially troubling when other options exist which are less expensive, faster to implement, enjoy far better buffers and are not in close proximity to a community center frequented by large numbers of children.

On behalf of Newtown and the City, I respectfully urge our County Commissioners to listen to their constituents. They have legitimate concerns. Reconsider the outrageously bad advice you are following from the out of state consultant. He clearly has no interest in or sensitivity to issues related to concentrated poverty, the historic struggle Newtown is overcoming and the opportunities ahead if not derailed by such an ill-conceived plan.

Let us strive together to do no harm and in the affirmative aspiration of the Athenian Oath, "Let us transmit this city greater and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us."