

VOICE-Buffalo calls for action on serious city concerns

By Kristyn Million
Staff Reporter

VOICE-Buffalo will be sharing its "Vision for a Just Community" at a public meeting on Oct. 16 at 7 p.m. at St. Martin de Porres Church in Buffalo. The purpose of the meeting is to bring together elected officials from the city, county, state and national levels, and present them with community concerns in need of transformation, which include housing, comprehensive regional planning, transportation, community policing and neighborhood revitalization.

"We'd like to get a lot of people to come out to this meeting," said Father Paul Bossi, co-president of VOICE-Buffalo and pastor of Blessed Sacrament Parish in Buffalo. "We want to show public officials we're united on these concerns. At this meeting, VOICE will be surfacing its issues, presenting them to the public officials and asking for a response."

Dennis Walczyk, treasurer for the VOICE-Buffalo board of directors, will be co-chairing the public meeting.

"We've invited many of our local and state officials," he said. "The mayor of the city of Buffalo, members of the Erie County legislature, members of the state assembly and state senate, Congressman Higgins and Congresswoman Slaughter, county executive Collins, and a number

of local town officials."

Walczyk said that they are optimistic that the meeting will bring about some progress and movement on the presented issues.

VOICE-Buffalo is a faith-based community-organizing project of urban and suburban congregations, which was established in 1996 and has been working to bring about positive change in the city since its inception. VOICE seeks to empower people who live in the community to act on their concerns, to take responsibility for what happens in their communities, and to break down barriers that divide neighborhoods and regions.

"The mission of VOICE is to create a place where citizens can participate in the decisions that affect their lives and their communities," said Nancy Freeland, director of VOICE-Buffalo. "We bring people together to emphasize the common interests that we all have, and so we can present our issues as a unified body."

Father Bossi said citizens are also people of faith who should speak in the public forum.

"When we stand together on common issues, across denominational lines, as a group of churches, we're showing these officials that we have many voters in our churches and these issues are important to us," Father Bossi said.

VOICE-Buffalo has celebrated its



Photo courtesy of VOICE-Buffalo

VOICE-Buffalo is involved in several community projects such as neighborhood clean-ups and political action.

share of successes over the last dozen years through the efforts and cooperation of multiple community groups working in conjunction with VOICE. The demolition of drug houses, the implementation of a five-point rodent control plan, a discussion video on the impact of sprawl in the city and suburbs, and the completion of a \$7 million reconstruction of the water and sewer infrastructure on Genesee Street are just a few of the achievements of the organization.

VOICE-Buffalo has also recognized a need to reach out to the suburbs to

involve other faith-based organizations in its mission as well. Walczyk noted that many of the issues that VOICE has dealt with are regional issues, including one of the organization's most pressing issues, unfettered growth.

"We feel the city still is the hub and core of Erie County, and what happens to the city eventually impacts the rest of Erie County," Walczyk explained. "Consider the problem of this unfettered infrastructure growth. We continue to lose population as a community, but we still are building out into suburban areas and rural areas. That leaves a core that is left to wither and die in many senses. And the core now, as a result of this unfettered growth, is extending into the first ring of suburbs. So the abandoned buildings, abandoned strip malls that you see, these are now appearing in Hamburg, in Cheektowaga. We want to point this out to people."

Walczyk is hopeful that people who attend the public meeting come out from the experience being energized and excited, with the recognition that VOICE-Buffalo is an organization that gets things done.

"Again, I just want to invite anybody who has an interest in the future of Buffalo and Erie County, and wants to see some positive change, to attend this meeting," he said.