

July 6, 2023: B-PEP Emergency Meeting at the B-PEP Headquarters to respond to recent Supreme Court Decisions.

This special meeting was attended by 27 individuals in person and another 4 people via Zoom, representatives from B-PEP and various Community Organizations. The meeting began at 6:30 p.m. at B-PEP headquarters and lasted more than two hours.

(The following are highlight notes from this powerful conversation):

Democracy Is Under Attack

Tim Stevens began the meeting with an impassioned oration saying that democracy in America, as we have understood it to exist for more than 50 years, is under attack. An extreme, right-wing U.S. Supreme Court has rolled back protections and targeted millions of Americans in a series of rulings that have reversed too much of the progress made in civil rights over the past 60 years.

“We’re here because we’re upset,” Tim told the group. “We never thought we’d see a time in America” where the Supreme Court would “violate the spirit of the Constitution.”

Women, people of color, gay people, and students who took out loans to attend college have all been devastated by the following, recent Supreme Court rulings:

- **Affirmative Action.** The right-wing, activist court ruled that a student applicant’s race could no longer be considered by colleges and universities that are looking to create a diverse, racially balanced student body. Tim pointed out that there are loopholes in this ruling which we should exploit to help students in need.
- **Abortion Rights.** The court overturned a woman’s right to have an abortion, leading to extreme abortion restrictions being imposed on women in more than 20 states. Tim spoke about a 10-year-old girl who was raped and was denied an abortion in her home state in Ohio. She had to travel to Indiana to receive the care she deserved.
- **Voting Rights.** The court gutted the Voting Rights Act first approved in 1965 and later reaffirmed in 2006.
- **Gay Rights.** By a 6-3 vote, the Court said a web designer had the right to deny services to a gay couple. The web designer said she denied

services to the gay couple on religious grounds. The six conservatives on the court said that was okay.

- **Student Loans.** In a controversial decision written by Chief Justice John Roberts, the court ruled that the Biden Administration's student loan program, which would have forgiven loans up to \$20,000 per borrower, was illegal. (Biden recently announced that borrowers may apply for a 12-month grace period before they need to start repaying their loans.)

The Mission: Moving from Complaint to Possibility...Planning to Implementation and Mobilization

“We need the community mobilized in a way that we’ve never seen before,” said Tim, who explained that those who want to effect change need to move from complaint to possibility, from planning to implementation and mobilization.

Roy Blankenship, Jr., and others read summaries of articles that supplied background information to the group. Amy Kleissas, of the League of Women Voters, said that, in drafting the student loan opinion, Roberts cited the “major decision doctrine.” The “major doctrine decision” says that the courts cannot grant an agency power to act (for example, to forgive student loan debt) unless Congress specifically granted those powers to the agency. The same doctrine has been used to limit the power of the Environmental Protection Agency in other rulings.

Proposed: An Emergency Meeting with All College Leaders in Western PA

Tim Stevens, Nyota Robinson, Terrie Griffin and others proposed that leaders of B-PEP, the Urban League, the NAACP, The Pittsburgh Promise, 100 Black Men, and the League of Women Voters should call for an emergency meeting with the leaders of every college in Western Pennsylvania to educate them – and the community – about where “there is still hope and where some of our rights can be maintained.”

Much discussion followed. It was agreed that the court ruling that threw out the Affirmative Action program had loopholes that could still offer advantages to people of color.

Ron Lawrence said a legal analysis should be completed before the meeting with college leaders so that colleges could understand exactly what their options are as they searched to create a racially and economically balanced student body. Jackie Dixon said that B-PEP should prepare summaries of the court rulings so that members of the community can easily understand what they mean.

Poor people, and people of color, it was agreed, could use college essays when they applied, to let college admissions officials know who they are, including their race and the challenges that they have overcome before they applied to college. Although colleges are now prohibited by the court ruling from using race as a condition for admission, the information in student essays can still supply information to admissions officials who want a diversified student body.

Discussed: Changing the U.S. Supreme Court

There was some discussion about changing the direction of the court by changing the number of Supreme Court justices from nine to 15. In fact, online research shows that Andrew Jackson added two justices (which brought the total to nine) in 1837.

During the Civil War, a 10th justice was added to ensure that a majority of the justices would vote with the North. And in 1937, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was tired of the court's refusal to allow landmark federal legislation such as Social Security, threatened to increase the number of justices to 15. In that case, two conservative justices relented; FDR's programs won approval, and the idea of packing the court was abandoned.

Ann Simms said that "you can't change the composition of the court." She said that perhaps Chief Justice Roberts is "becoming embarrassed about the raggedy condition of the court" and that the justices have worked together on some rulings that help our interests.

She pointed out that, on June 27, the court ruled against North Carolina Republicans who tried to push through a gerrymandered election law map that would have discriminated against Black and poor people. The North Carolina Supreme Court threw out that map as defective and the U.S. Supreme Court agreed that the state court had the power to do that.

In Progress: Upgraded Outreach and More Programs with Black Churches. Walter Hales described the programs he is working on to increase involvement with Black churches. "No one votes," Walt said, "unless they understand what's in it for them."

Walt said he was working on "explainer videos" to motivate voters. He said Baptist ministers, and ministers with small congregations are stressed out meeting their spiritual and financial obligations, and it is difficult to get them to commit to an election-oriented cause.

There was much discussion about improving outreach to students, and to other constituencies such as the prisoners in the Allegheny County Jail.

Impediments to outreach: Judy Clack and Amy Kleissas of the League of Women Voters said there was a disconnect between political leaders and voters. By 2024, more than 40 percent of voters will be between 18 and 29 years old. They don't relate to people running for office who are as much as 60 years older than they are. Younger voters care about issues such as racism, gay rights, fair housing, jobs, and climate change. They can be reached through these issues, not through political parties or names of candidates who mean very little to them. In the county jail, 1,500 prisoners could potentially vote. But more than two-thirds of the people in jail suffer from illiteracy and may need help in filling out ballots properly, so they will be counted.

Ongoing: Culture Wars in School Board Elections

Although there was much discussion about involving Gov. Shapiro and the State Human Relations Commission – and these are legitimate avenues to pursue – Judy Clack pointed out that one of the biggest challenges to democracy is coming at the school board level.

In many communities, whole slates of candidates are running to challenge school curricula. Right-wing candidates want to stop accurate discussion about the history of this country and how enslaved people made America's economic growth possible. Although this history of enslavement has affected generations of African Americans, and many promises to Black people were made and broken, right-wing board of education candidates want to stop this truth from being told in schools.

The League of Women Voters is nonpartisan. Clack said the League faces a daunting challenge to compile information on a flood of new candidates and to inform voters about the candidates' stands on the issues. Lorraine said her ongoing effort – central to B-PEP's mission – is to get “souls to the polls.” For years, B-PEP has worked with the League and others to stage forums where voters can meet candidates at all levels and learn about the issues for themselves. Given the political situation in the country, that effort remains more important than ever. Lorraine said people should understand the consequences of staying home on Election Day. They can lose meals. They can lose their rights.

Hope: A Reality and an Important Message

Throughout the meeting, many stressed how important it is to educate voters, and to let them know that they are important and their vote matters. People who feel defeated do not vote.

Nyota proposed eight ways to organize future actions. Strategies can be developed to approach the people who loosely fit in each category, or “bucket.”

Here are the categories Nyota proposed:

- Media/Social Media
- Outreach
- Education
- Religious Groups
- Government Relations
- Executives: Professionals, consultants
- The Community
- Political/Electoral Information

Please note: A tape recording of the meeting is available.

Notes submitted July 13, 2023

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