St. Francis Prayer Center’s involvement in Flint environmental justice cases

The Saint Francis Prayer Center is a Catholic retreat house originally founded to provide a sanctuary space for Flint residents to engage with each other to overcome racial and religious divisions.

Starting in 1993, the Prayer Center has been an active participant in environmental litigation that would close the Genesee Power Station in Flint, Michigan which was releasing a significant amount of lead into the community. The Prayer Center participated in legal action again in 1998 to prevent construction of the Select Steel Plant in Flint. The St. Francis Prayer Center collection provides insight into intersection between environmental activism and social and community justice. Litigation files include briefs, motions, exhibits, correspondence, reports, meeting minutes, newspaper clippings, and related materials detailing the Center’s efforts to fight environmental racism.

Flyer distributed to community. Genesee County Power Station, Misc. 74--Flyers" Saint Francis Prayer Center records. Bentley Historical Collection, UM.
The Saint Francis Prayer Center of Flint, Michigan is a donation supported Catholic
retreat center founded in 1975 by Father Philip Schmitter and Sister Joanne Chiaverini.
The goals of the Saint Francis Prayer Center were to provide a central location for the
local community to walk, to provide spiritual guidance, and to bridge gaps that exists
between religious and racial lines. Over the years the Fr. Schmitter and Sr. Chiaverini
have expanded the mission of the Center to include advocacy on environmental justice
issues facing Flint.

The Saint Francis Prayer Center was deeply involved in two important legal cases
regarding environmental justice and racism. In NAACP v. John Engler et al. the Center
was a plaintiff in the attempt to close the Genesee Power Station in Flint. It was also a
part of a 1998 filing of a Title VI complaint (part of the Civil Rights Act of 1964) which
claimed that the construction of the Select Steel Mill violated the civil rights of the
residents in Flint.

In 1993 the Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) issued a permit to the
Genesee Power Station, whose fuel supply included construction and demolition wood
containing lead based paint. The permit allowed lead emissions of 2.4 tons per year into
the local, already highly polluted, mostly African-American community. After several
years of litigation the court issued an injunction prohibiting the State of Michigan from
granting any more permits until it had reformed its system of environmental protections,
including requirements that the state perform risk assessments and reform its public
hearing process, which the court found was not "meaningful." Throughout this process
the Saint Francis Prayer Center opened its doors to the litigation team of the Sugar Law
Center and Fr. Schmitter and Sr. Chiaverini were highly involved in the legal process,
appearing at trial every day.

In June of 1998, the MDEQ granted a permit to the Select Steel Corporation to build a
steel recycling plant in northern Flint, Michigan, again adjacent to a largely African-
American neighborhood. The residents of the community, along with two community-
based organizations filed a Title VI administrative complaint. In August 1998, the EPA
Office of Civil Rights accepted the complaint for investigation. On October 30, 1998, 74
days after it accepted the Select Steel complaint, the OCR issued its first and only
substantive Title VI decision in the 25 years that EPA’s paragraph 602 regulations had
been in effect. In its decision, the EPA found no Title VI violation and ruled in favor of the
State. In March, 1999, sixteen, of the more than 20 groups of complainants from the still-
pending administrative actions, jointly filed a Petition with the EPA seeking to have the
Select Steel decision reconsidered. This appeal was also denied.

These important cases as well as other community issues in which the Center has been
involved demonstrate the commitment that the staff at the Saint Francis Prayer Center
has to issues of environmental justice and community well-being. The Saint Francis
Prayer Center continues to be a source of spiritual and material assistance to the city of
Flint and the surrounding area.

Content from the Bentley Historical Collection, University of Michigan:
http://bentley.umich.edu/research/guides/conservation/activism.php and
http://quod.lib.umich.edu/b/bhlead/umich-bhl-0467?byte=116825466;focusrgn=bioghist;subview=standard;view=reslist.