

Resolution Passes Council Recognizing Glendale's 'Sundown Town' History

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By Julie BUTCHER

On Tuesday night, the Glendale City Council voted unanimously to adopt a resolution affirming Glendale's racist past, including acknowledging that it was a "Sundown Town," apologizing for the pain caused by its past, and vowed to move forward in an actively anti-racist, inclusionary direction.

The council heard from city staff as well as from citizen callers into the meeting. Save small exception, public support for the action was positive and enthusiastic.

Christine Powers overviewed the detailed, footnoted research report.

"We cannot contend with racism in the future if we don't understand its place in the past," she said.

Glendale was incorporated in 1906. According to 1910 the census, the Black population of Glendale at that time was less than 0.2%. Today, it is estimated at less than 2%.

The city has been referred to as a "Sundown Town," defined as "any organized jurisdiction that for decades kept African Americans or other groups from living in it and was thus 'all-White' on purpose," by sociologist James Loewen, who wrote the book "Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism." Loewen identified more than one hundred sundown towns in California, including Glendale.

While there is no official record of its designation, ample evidence exists to support the claim, Powers told the council. Glendale was home to White supremacist organizations including the Ku Klux Klan from the 1920s through the 1960s and the American Nazi Party in the 1960s until it was run out of town in the late '70s. Other groups made Glendale their home in the 1980s and '90s, including various Aryan nationalist groups.

Both informal and formal methods of exclusion were utilized. Intimidation, harassment and violence against Black people who moved into or visited Glendale have all been documented through hate crime reports in local newspapers and through contemporaneous accounts and oral histories. Researchers found that individuals who were not White were prohibited from being buried in Glendale's Forest Lawn until the 1960s.

Formally, racially restrictive housing covenants were advertised, starting in the 1910s and '20s. By the 1940s, the idea became so popular that in 1942 the Race Restriction Committee was formed by the Glendale chapter of the California Real Estate Association to establish perpetual race restrictions on all parcels in Glendale. (These covenants were outlawed in 1968 with the passage of the Federal Fair Housing Act.)

Federal maps of every metropolitan area were color-coded to indicate where it was considered safe to insure mortgages and to classify neighborhoods worthy of investment or lending. Developed in the 1930s by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation to determine the level of risk associated with each community, the maps were created by local realtors. The primary consideration was race. The colors were green, blue, yellow, and red. Any area where African Americans lived were colored red. From this practice the term redlining arose.

The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) also used subjective criteria based on race. Yellow and red areas were often ineligible for loans; the federal government would not provide insurance backing for some mortgages in redlines and some yellow classified neighborhoods. Without FHA backing, most could not afford the alternative: high down payment, high interest rate, short-term loans. The result of the lack of investment led to urban decay.

City staff found and shared maps from 1939 clearly showing the color demarcations.

Beyond recommending the adoption of the drafted resolution, staff recommended the creation of an Historical Context Statement, described as an organizing structure for grouping information about historic properties that share a common theme, place and time. Here the focus would be on African Americans, Latinx, Eastern Asian and Western Asian subsections.

The resolution, Powers explained, acknowledges, apologizes for, and condemns all racially-motivated discriminatory or exclusionary aspects of the city's history and is part of a year-long plan to focus on inclusion and equity – an anti-racist Glendale.

Tara Peterson called in to support the resolution and to recognize Christine Powers for her support and empathy as she worked closely with members of the anti-racist community coalition. Peterson read excerpts of old hurtful letters written to council in years past.

Ingrid Gunnell read the entire resolution and urged unanimous support to “recognize the past harm and move towards healing, especially on the part of the Black members of our community.”

Lucy Petrosian, chair of the Armenian National Committee of America – Glendale Chapter (ANCA – Glendale), called in to urge the unanimous adoption of the resolution.

“ANCA commends the Jewel City for committing to be a place where all can thrive, a model of racial justice, proud of the inclusivity of all its residents,” Petrosian said.

Tanita Harris-Ligons recalled the reasons for her founding the organization Black In Glendale and thanked all the members of the coalition, urging the council to “do the right thing.”

“I’m grateful that there are community members who understand this is not just a piece of paper but that it comes with the energy of atonement. Now, do the work required behind it. Honor the contributions of the diverse community coalition and act on meaningful policies and programs that improve Black representation in Glendale on all fronts,” Harris-Ligons urged.

Mike Mohill called in to remind the council that “we’re not in leftist San Francisco or New York” and to wonder “who had the audacity to put this on the agenda?”

“Glendale was a cruel place; I have to tell you that,” Councilmember Ara Najarian said expressing his strong support for the resolution. “I’m shocked to see those redlined neighborhoods on the maps of neighborhoods I know, neighborhoods I drive through.”

Najarian urged council to go beyond simply passing the resolution. “I say we contact the country clubs and the social clubs, the fraternal organizations and the board of realtors and the

chambers of commerce and the homeowners associations and we become ambassadors of this. They're part of the history too."

Councilmember Dan Brotman expressed his enthusiastic support, noting that to his knowledge only three cities in the country have acted to renounce their prior status as a sundown town, none in California, making Glendale the first.

"To quote one of my heroes, Celtics legend Bill Russell, 'the effects of racial terror perpetrated over hundreds of years don't disappear simply because America wills them to,'" said Councilmember Ardashes "Ardy" Kassakhian. "The vast majority of our residents are good people who care to make Glendale a more fair, open, and inclusive city. ... This resolution is a small step towards that acknowledgement but the real work to fix that which ails us has to come from each of us and requires us to not cast blame but to reach out to one another with compassion and understanding to educate and learn."

The council voted unanimously in favor of the resolution.

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