

LOCAL NEWS

UCM schedules annual meeting

Sheltered Care Home among topics

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The United Congregations of Metro East will conduct its sixth annual Faith and Democracy Public Action Meeting from 7 p.m. until 8:30 p.m. on Oct. 30 at the New Life in Christ Interdenominational Church in Lebanon.

Members of the 26 churches belonging to UCM will be joined by public officials, friends, and allies to discuss issues that UCM has prioritized for public action.

UCM's lead organizer Ken Aud said the general public is invited to attend the free event, but attendees are encouraged to pre-register by sending their name, address, phone number and e-mail address to him at kaud@hotmail.com, or by calling 451-1458. People can also register at the door.

"Everyone is welcome to attend," Aud said.

In a media briefing Wednesday, UCM provided information about the issues to be discussed in the public meeting next week. The organizers are asking on the support of elected public officials for issues where they see a need for change.

Issues targeted this year include health care, the Madison County Sheltered Care Home, jobs and job training, diversity in school districts and housing, and Cool Cities for care of the environment.

UCM is also announcing that the affiliates of the Gamaliel Foundation in Illinois are uniting to form Gamaliel of Illinois. They believe that together they can be a powerful alliance that will make an even greater impact on legislation in the Illinois General Assembly that will improve the lives of residents all across Illinois.

Gamaliel of Illinois will concentrate its initial efforts on health care, transportation, and capital development programs.

Allies in the new organization include UCM, Quad Cities Interfaith in Moline and Rock Island, Pilsen Neighbors, South Suburban Action Conference and new community groups organizing in Springfield and Peoria.

UCM Vice President Brookes Hairston said the organization is working for both state and federal legislation to improve delivery of health care for all. He said 1 million to 8 million people in the state of Illinois are without health care and nationwide the figure is 48 million.

UCM is working with the Campaign for Better Health Care and its allies for state action and with the Gamaliel Foundation and its national allies on the Health Care for America Now coalition. Both campaigns aim to provide guaranteed, quality, affordable, and accessible health care for all. UCM is calling on both federal and state officials to pass legislation that will provide health care for all individuals who are currently without access to health care.

In a petition drive, UCM collected more than 10,000 signatures to put a question about continued operation of the Sheltered Care Home on the November ballot. The petition drive was organized shortly after the Madison County Board voted in April to close the Sheltered Care Home. This vote came after the County Board had invested more than two years and spent more than \$475,000 on plans for a proposed new building for the home.

Madison County voters have twice approved the minimal tax that goes to support operation of the Sheltered Care Home and UCM believes the voters are entitled to have a say in the continued operation of the home. The ballot question is an advisory referendum and does not obligate board members to act to save the home, but UCM members are hopeful that they will get the message.

Dennis Nobbe has a sister in the Sheltered Care Home in Edwardsville. He said she entered the home just before the board voted to close it.

"They are trying to push people out into 'better' facilities," he said. "There is no place available that even comes close to the care they receive at Sheltered Care. Alan Dunstan says it's too expensive. Is \$8.20 per \$100,000 on our real estate too big a price to pay to help these people in need?"

Nobbe who said he is a Friend of Shelter Care, said if the home closes the residents there, including his sister, would be put out of the place that cares for them.

Supporters of the Sheltered Care Home include AARP, Friends of the Shelter, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, family members of the residents, and UCM.

Calling it a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, UCM is really pushing for the participation of local residents in the building of the New Mississippi River Bridge and the related highway projects.

UCM member Ron Trimmer, member of the statewide Jobs Now task force, said people need an opportunity to develop their potential with training for the construction jobs that will be made available by the bridge project.

He said in 2007, African Americans comprised 17 percent of the work force, yet only 10 percent of construction workers at a time when there is a scarcity of workers. An even smaller percentage of women are employed in construction.

"Only 3 percent are women even though we all know that women can do the work," Trimmer said. "During World War II, they went into the factories and built aircraft."

Trimmer said a bill that would generate funds for Illinois Works Capital Projects passed in the Illinois House Sept. 10 and awaits consideration in the Senate. The bill sets goals for low-income, minority, and women apprenticeships that would lead to journeyman status.

UCM has the support of the Greater Madison County Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, for the provisions of the Jobs Now task force. A successful effort in the reconstruction of Interstate 64 led to the training of more than 60 low-income, people of color, and women in the I-64 project.

The Missouri and Illinois departments of transportation have agreed to follow the same process for the building of the bridge, but Trimmer said local IDOT officials have been resisting its efforts to use the same process for the Illinois portion of the project.

UCM and its allies are asking that the roundtable process used for I-64 be used for the \$300-million construction of the rerouting of northbound Interstate 70 in Illinois and for the extensive interchange work on the highways in East St. Louis. They are still trying to work with local and state IDOT officials to create the roundtable.

Cheryl Sommer, a pastoral associate at St. Clare Catholic Church in O'Fallon, said while about 25 percent of students in the schools there are minorities, only about 2 percent of the teaching staff are minorities. She said UCM members have joined with Mayor Gary Graham, school board members, superintendents and interested residents to implement the best practices to increase racial diversity within the schools' staff.

They are also working on a solution to the problem created by a proposal to close Rock Springs Mobile Home Park to make way for a luxury housing development. At least 20 of the mobile homes cannot be moved, meaning 20 fewer affordable homes in the city of O'Fallon plus the potential loss of those that can be moved.

She said a Rock Springs Citizens Committee has been formed to work with UCM to address the concerns with city officials.

"Exciting plans for both will be shared at the public meeting on Oct. 30."

Members of UCM believe that the care of the environment is a moral and Biblical commitment.

"If people of faith are to contribute to environmental sustainability, care for creation needs to be brought to the center of congregational life – through worship, learning, discipleship and advocacy," UCM maintains.

The UCM Alton Cluster's efforts have led to UCM joining with the Sierra Club in its Cool Cities initiative. Through their work with the Sierra Club, Mayor Don Sandidge and his staff, the city of Alton became the first Cool City in the Metro East.

Some of the energy saving steps Alton has taken include replacing stoplights and the lighting in municipal buildings with LED bulbs and turning lights out whenever feasible. The city is installing a vacuum system to remove leaves and replace burning them. The Sewage Treatment facility has installed a solar panel and steps are under way to construct a municipal wind farm.

Mayor Sandidge told UCM, "Our goal is for Alton to provide its own energy for municipal buildings and sell the excess to Ameren in order to reduce the cost for its citizens."

The mayor and the city of Alton will be saluted at the October meeting for raising the environmental bar for the Metro East.

Directions to the New Life in Christ Interdenominational Church in Lebanon are as follows: Take I-64 east to Exit 19-B, the Route 50 Carlyle exit, but stay on Scott-Troy Road (you will cross over Route 50 at the stoplight); proceed north on Scott-Troy Road for two miles; the church is on the left in the Keck-Ridge subdivision.