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## Group meets to discuss ways to preserve, revive historic Lafayette neighborhood

BY KAILEY BROUSSARD | Special to The Advocate

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Tiffany Williams with the LSU AgCenter demonstrates a recipe for the health cooking of collard greens during the Cooking in the Hood event on Saturday afternoon December 3, 2016. The event to promote health in the McComb-Veazey neighborhood is being held at Christ Church Northside. ORG XMIT: 00053964A

Advocate photo by JOHN ROWLAND

A group met over gumbo and greens Saturday to discuss ways to preserve a historic Lafayette community with a rich cultural heritage.

The discussion at Christ Church focused on the McComb-Veazey neighborhood, a community that several prominent African-American civil rights and cultural figures in Lafayette once called home.

Residents and expatriates at Saturday's dinner discussed fortifying the neighborhood while maintaining the area's culture.

Hosted by the McComb-Veazey Neighborhood Coterie, the event featured live cooking demonstrations by the Louisiana State University Agriculture Center, brainstorming sessions for neighborhood projects and presentations by community members.

Volunteers for the nonprofit organization also asked the 40 community members attending to share their ideas for renaming and revamping Pontiac Point, the park area where Simcoe Street and Jefferson Boulevard meet.

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“With things like this, if the community doesn’t have ownership in the project or they don’t feel like this project reflects them or reflects the community, it’s hard to get that community buy-in,” said Tina Bingham, executive vice president of the McComb-Veazey Neighborhood Coterie.

Workshop attendees visited the park across the street from the church at 800 Jefferson St., where a shaded park houses a community labyrinth and array of mosaic pieces. The group deliberated ideas such as implementing more lighting and a stage area to raise awareness of the area. They also discussed the need for bike lanes and better sidewalks.

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“With these projects, we’re hoping that the community takes some ownership of it and they start seeing what a little bit of time and a little bit of money can do to beautify the space and make the neighborhood a little bit better,” Bingham said.

Inside the church meeting room, community members had the opportunity jot down things they like about the community, ideas that could be implemented promptly and long-term plans.

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The cooking demonstration was accompanied by questions of how the community can promote healthier diet options and promote community engagement. Ideas proposed included junior chef competitions, a map of McComb detailing where people can find healthy food alternatives and creating sustainable gardens.

Leonard Viltz, a McComb-Veazey resident and avid promoter of local culture, studied Pontiac Point's map as he wrote notes on a survey sheet.

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“Without culture, there is no point of living because you don’t look forward to anything,” Viltz said. “People who practice their culture are more reliable; they enjoy life more. I want to see what I can do to provide some answers to ... reimagining Pontiac Point.”

The event was funded by the Kresge Foundation’s Fresh, Local and Equitable (FreshLo) Initiative, which awards 26 organizations with \$75,000 each to plan and create food-oriented developments.

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The neighborhood coterie was created to rejuvenate a once-vibrant neighborhood that was home to such prominent African-American figures as Zydeco musician Clifton Chenier, civil rights advocate Helma Constantine and Paul Breaux, a son of former slaves who was the principal of Lafayette's first public school for

blacks since reconstruction.

Bingham said gatherings like Saturday's are "a way for us to kind of validate what we proposed originally in our grant and get the community's feedback on some things and move forward in the community."

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The neighborhood was also picked for the AARP's Best Places Award in 2015 for its attempts at preserving its heritage and the coterie's efforts to improve the neighborhood.

McComb-Veazey residents, business owners and churches teamed up with city-parish government planning staff in 2008 and have held periodic meetings and events.

Their latest plan includes creating a Creole Arts and Culture District. The coterie is also vocal in discussions surrounding the I-49 connector conversation that may cut through the neighborhood.

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Essie Lyles, a Cecilia resident who lived in McComb for nearly three decades and is a former Paul Breaux Middle School teacher, said she began following coterie activity since its members began discussing the overpass. Although she no longer lives in the neighborhood, she said she still considers it home.

"I would like to see a safer place: A safer, clean, inviting place where other people in the community can come and see what's going on in McComb-Veazey and come and engage in McComb-Veazey. It's a very engaging place if you let yourself in it."

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Coteries, or groups with shared interests, have popped up around the U.S., with two in Lafayette.

Joined by the Freetown-Port Rico Coterie, the McComb-Veazey group is focused on improving the neighborhood's safety and linking North and South Lafayette while maintaining each region's culture — the latter of which Viltz said locals haven't accomplished.

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"I would say African-Americans ... don't talk about it, don't acknowledge it and they don't realize how much they provide culture to everybody," Viltz lamented. "Without knowing that, you're creating a big void, and they don't know that they're responsible for a lot to the culture that surrounds them."

The next community dinner is set for 5 p.m. Jan. 13 at the Heymann Recreation Center at 1600 S. Orange St.

MORE INFORMATION



Lafayette's McComb-Veazey neighborhood poised for cultural district designation