

The Challenges of Improving Underserved Communities regardless of the race of the leaders in Birmingham, AL.

“I Became the Economic Rights Case Study”
by Brian K. Rice, the Community Engineer
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Over 4700 homicides have tragically taken place in my hometown of Birmingham, AL, since the election of our first Black mayor in 1979. The City has ranged from nearly 195,000 to 245,000 people over the last 44 years. Unfortunately, the super majority of the victims come from men and boys who look like me in a nearly 70% majority Black



city. 2024 marks the 45 consecutive years of Black mayors and nearly 40 years of a majority Black city council. Now, I'm going to switch conversation and focus on what is unbalancing the conditions, and it is not just race.

As a native son of Birmingham, a mechanical engineer, real estate investor and economic rights advocate volunteering, living and investing in underserved communities, I have picked up an extensive understanding of government and banking policies related to residential and commercial real estate financing practices as I am representing myself in two federal lawsuits involving both the government and the corporate community. I could not find attorneys to stand with me, and I knew if I didn't stand for my own rights, I would not have those rights, so I said I would do my best and leave until the Lord, the rest.

Both lawsuits focus on the systemic denial of resources in under-resourced majority Black commercial business districts in Birmingham. One covers the actions of majority public interest concerns involving the current Mayor's administration and the removal of federal resources from Downtown Ensley through 2028. The other covers my unbelievable \$0.00 appraisal on nearly 33,000sf of real estate with tenants in several of the buildings. Both can be downloaded at www.briankrice.com or through the federal courts.

Please, please, please, Black leaders, stop with the Civil Rights Movement talk and appearance of progress locally and nationally while many deny the reality of known economic discrimination and associated civil rights in the present in their

own communities. Birmingham's inner-city conditions are identical to many more across the country with similar sets of leadership, and somehow, resources for economic development keep reaching the affluent but never reaching those facing known systemic economic challenges.

MLK addressed the two opposing forces in the Black community of Birmingham in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail in 1963. Today, the biggest concern in many of our under-resourced communities is not the oppression and exclusion of others but the participation of oppression and exclusion from our own.

MLK wrote from this same city 61 years ago, the following: "At first I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my nonviolent efforts as those of an extremist. I began thinking about the fact that I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency, made up in part of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, are so drained of self-respect and a sense of "somebodiness" that they have adjusted to segregation; and in part of a few middle class Negroes who, because of a degree of academic and economic security and because in some ways they profit by segregation, have become insensitive to the problems of the masses. The other force is one of bitterness and hatred, and it comes perilously close to advocating violence." Letter From a Birmingham Jail by Martin Luther King, Jr.

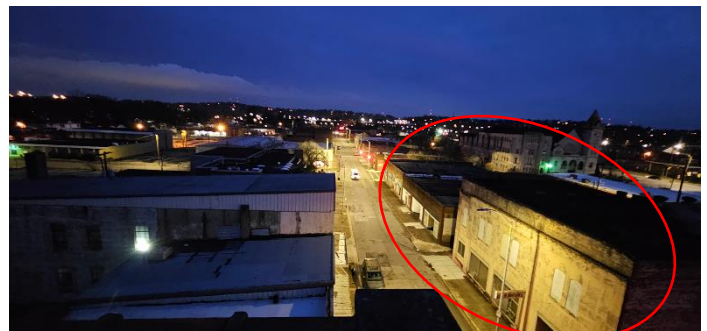
The Black elite, who benefit from what we often call "the cliques," have found success here and often look down upon those who have not. Today, they benefit from the civil rights movement, and most have chosen never to help those surrounded by deprivation. They made it.

I have also been studying the small business environment of Black Birmingham stretching back 100+ years. I've learned that the racial disparities under the majority Black government are almost identical to the racial disparities under the government of the last White mayor, which was Mayor David Vann, who served from 1975 – 1979. Under Vann, a 10% set aside initiative was launched to ensure "Black" contractors and service providers who had been locked out for the previous 106 years of Birmingham's existence got a share of the government. The reality of this transaction was based on "minority and women", not Black and the vast divide remained until this day. Birmingham averaged around 10% from 1977 to roughly 1990 for minorities and women. From 1990 to 2005, Birmingham

dropped from 9.4% to 4.6% for business services from women and minorities per the 2007 City racial disparity study. The 2022 racial disparity study covering 2015 – 2019, which still has not been released to the public by the government, has reached 8.51% for all Minority & Women Business Enterprises (MWBE) across all purchasing categories. In professional services, we dropped from 20.2% in 1990 to 4.6% in 2005 to 0.87% in 2019 per both the 2007 and 2022 disparity studies. If our businesses cannot grow, our families cannot be supported. When the income providers are excluded, our adults, youth and communities are not supported. I've broken this down in my book 'Inclusive Systemic Economic Injustice' published in 2023 where I cover the last 125 years of real estate practices here then followed by the economic conditions faced by our Black businesses.

Unfortunately, it feels like the sun never comes up in our under-resourced communities with many leaders looking like those from the communities. Light often never penetrates the mind of the youth here. The lights in the community remain dark. Buildings remain dark. Vacant spaces consume too much real estate. When I leave the west side of Birmingham and travel to the center of the city, it feels like the sun has blessed the haves with impressive economic development opportunities and excluded those not in the cliques and not of another hue.

I now understand long-lasting economic deprivation and the stress it causes on decaying buildings that will become condemned. If you starve the businesses and the owners in these communities today, who is going to rent, own and redevelop the buildings left in their communities? Who is going to create jobs and new opportunities? I now understand why the boards remain, the roofs eventually cave in, and a few find success in the conditions.

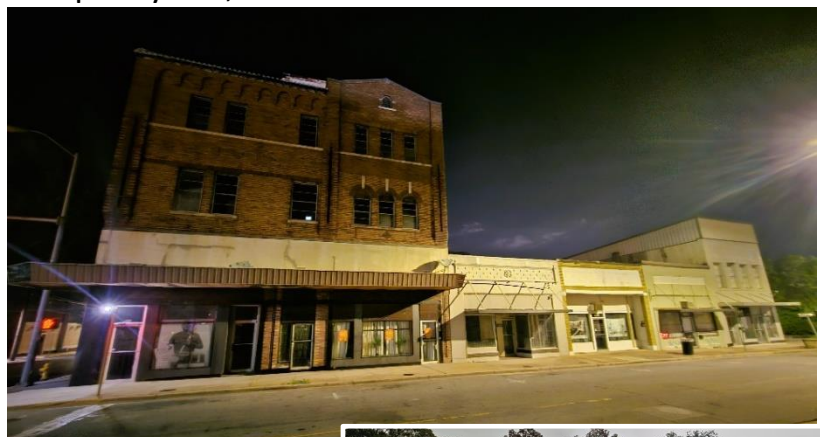


I've witnessed firsthand the persistent challenges facing our inner-city neighborhoods while investing in the Ensley neighborhood. My hometown has witnessed a vast divide in resources and opportunities for the have and have-not that is compounding the challenges experienced by our most underserved. It would be easy to blame race, but I have chosen not to look at race as the sole source but also to look at the systemic practices and caste under a Black-led

government in a majority Black city. I have tried to understand more as to why Black communities and businesses have not fared any better.

Reflecting on the truth we see; I am compelled to question what we are not adequately addressing. I believe the systematic denial of economic resources for successive generations is far more harmful than most acknowledge, as it is the source of provision for all families and communities. Accepting unfortunate conditions as the way they are and always will be is a challenge. The greatest challenge is improving the mind of someone who has immersed themselves in the worst of conditions. Street, non-domestic homicides are just one by-product of choosing the worst of the conditions and we have too many of those. Unfortunately, much more is expected when positive outlets are missing.

In 2013, I moved back home with the intention of creating needed programs in underserved communities. However, I soon realized that programming resources seemed committed elsewhere. As a result, I decided to invest in commercial real estate. My goal was clear: create a sustainable source of income to foster an environment that supports entrepreneurs and promotes personal growth and self-sufficiency among residents. However, I soon encountered challenging financial hurdles when my properties were appraised at an unjust valuation of \$0.00 that was backed by the State regulatory board and Federal Reserve Board of Governors. This act locked me out of 100% of my equity related to my buildings. Everyone looked the other way. Many Black businessmen, real estate leaders, bankers, officials, and public employees today have chosen to despise me for fighting for my economic rights. It's pretty sad, but I now understand MLK's statement about the two opposing forces he faced in Birmingham in 1963. I don't know if any of them could ever see me and those around me in the historically deprived area as persons deserving of rights.



The \$0.00 Appraised Buildings were compared to farmland and a abandoned car wash 10 miles away in the appraisal for similar comps. Jefferson County Board of Equalization then removed owner right to protest property taxes with the \$0.00 Appraisal.

Back to the economics of systemic denial of property rights, the economic barrier created by a \$0.00 appraisal not only prevented me from providing for myself but also prevented me from improving the buildings and helping others. The Black lady over the local Board of Equalization then removed my right to protest my property taxes to challenge the \$0.00 appraisal. I said, “What did I step in? I invested in some sort of underworld called the inner city, where it seemed that it didn’t matter which direction I went; pitfalls were there. None in leadership chose to stop the successive economic acts of discrimination long before I arrived in Ensley, as if there were no rights to be expected here, once the White flight took place.

I then witnessed numerous times when the local government supported the very affluent who had already renovated buildings, who then went back to the same leaders, saying the building was still distressed, neglected, and blighted. The affluent were always approved for funds for distressed buildings even when the distressed conditions were removed, but they used the language of the underserved and under-resourced when making the request.

Our communities remain dark because of silent barriers. However, the dream in me “could not and cannot” be smothered by the obstacles I see. I have become laser-focused on breaking through economic barriers.

I embarked on a journey of economic justice, and along the way, I uncovered that downtown Ensley boasts the highest concentration of Black commercial property owners in Alabama, yet it is trapped in time between its decaying historic buildings and hope. I asked myself many questions about Ensley’s community history. Consider this: despite over 50 commercial properties owned by Black owners, I have only learned of one receiving a loan from a local bank for development in 40 or more years.

For nearly twenty years, I have studied the economic conditions of Black communities nationally as a pastime. Investing and living in an under-resourced community caused me to become the economic rights case study. It was not by choice. I don’t wish what happened to me to happen to anyone behind me and that is why I am building a bridge to cross the rough waters, ravine, gorge, and chasm that were deep and wide. In the Bridge Builder poem written by Mrs. Will

Allen Droomgoole, she wrote, “This chasm that been naught to me, to that fair-haired youth, may a pitfall be. Good friend, I am building the bridge for him. ”

I now study the laws affecting under-resourced communities, as shown to the right in the Jefferson County legal library.



I learned the Ensley business community was faced with what I believed were silent barriers related to banking, property taxes, insurance, federal programming, and other local planning initiatives. Generations of barriers have perpetuated a cycle of under-resourcing, underfunding, and underinvestment. For the first time in my life, I could see and define systemic injustice. It has been common to hear people complain about the system being the reason for their conditions without diving deeper into a specific action. Systemic injustice occurs when an unjust or unequal act is placed in a system, and the unjust or unequal act is embedded in laws, policies, practices, or customs. The act can be a pure custom that could come from your neighbor, or it could be through a policy so well written that the average eye can't see it, so it can be challenged in our legal system and changed in our political system.

It's time to dispel the myth of "underserved" communities. These areas are starved of economic resources, making them vulnerable and malnourished. Where there is economic starvation, property owners cannot secure resources to renovate spaces for the next business owner. Where the business owner is locked out, the local families can never be supported with jobs.

When the family cannot be supported, the entire family and community become vulnerable, and that vulnerability lasts for numerous generations. I can't access the potential earning power to support the needed programs I wanted to bring to the underserved. We cannot continue to blame these communities for their plight and blight without addressing the structural barriers that have perpetuated their distress.

Ensley is not an isolated case. Similar narratives of economic challenges plague the United States. We must break our silence and demand equitable opportunities. Furthermore, we must hold our elected and corporate leaders accountable, even when it's harder to do because they seem much larger than us

or they are from one of our peer, family or community circles. We have to get past the silent barriers and address the biggest challenges in front of us. Let's remove the caste-like thinking, regardless of race, and improve the conditions around us. Together, we can unleash the untapped potential in our most underserved communities.

I urge every citizen to familiarize themselves with local, state, and federal laws pertaining to property rights, government contracting and economic development. Knowledge empowers us to stand for our rights and effect needed change.

It's time to end the era of economic injustice. America deserves better. We must dismantle the economic barriers that have hindered progress and restore the promise of opportunity to every corner of our country. Let us move forward with unwavering resolve, knowing that our actions today will pave the way for a better tomorrow. Our most challenged and underserved communities are worth fighting for.

There is no way my buildings should have ever been appraised less than a single U.S. Penny. I will never look down on distressed communities. We must address the structural barriers that allow the underserved, under-resourced, trauma-filled conditions to thrive. We are Americans too. We deserve liberty and economic opportunity without the silent barriers built into systemic economic injustice.

With Economic Justice, Our Communities Can Thrive. We can create healthy and balanced communities if we recognize the truth and remove the barriers, regardless of race. It will not happen overnight because the trauma of it all has compounded like interest under the rule of 72.

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