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Obama Urged To Appoint Reparations Commission

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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – In the wake of the mass murder of nine Black church members in Charleston, S.C. and the rash of unsolved fires at Black churches in the South, a coalition of Black groups are calling on President Barack Obama to issue an executive order to establish a "reparatory justice" commission.

"This is a moment in which you have to act and we believe that from Ferguson to Baltimore to Charleston and obviously before that there is an urgent need to ask why this keeps happening and to definitely have the kind of conversation and action to move the nation forward," said Ron Daniels, the president of the Institute of the Black World 21st Century (IBW) and the convener of the National African-American Reparations Commission (NAARC), a group of Black leaders that represent educational, health, advocacy and faith-based organizations.

Daniels said that the uprising in Baltimore triggered by the murder of Freddie Gray exposed the deep-seated isolation and racial disparities that exist in that city and other urban centers across the nation that clearly illustrate the ongoing impact of White supremacy in this country.

"It's not always people that are overtly hostile, sometimes people don't see and understand the plight of



Black people," said Daniels.

White people look at things one way and Black people look at things a different way, said Daniels, adding that some White people simply don't understand the implicit bias that President Barack Obama addressed during his eulogy for Rev. Clementa Pinckney, the pastor of Emanuel A.M.E Church who was one of nine people shot to death during a Bible study at the church on June 17.

"There needs to be an aggressive approach by this country which does not deny or hide, but confronts and addresses the issues [affecting Black people] and provides the appropriate level of action and initiative for reparatory justice for people of African descent," said Rev. JoAnn Watson, a NAARC Commissioner and a former member of the Detroit City Council.

Watson said that the

approach addressed in the request for a reparatory justice commission is long overdue, because many initiatives that have preceded the NAARC proposal have gone unfulfilled and unfinished.

Watson noted that Special Field Order Number 15, issued by General William T. Sherman in January of 1865 in an effort to secure 400,000 acres for freed slaves, was later rescinded by President Andrew Johnson following the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. The Freedman's Bureau, formerly called the U.S. Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, was created by Congress at the end of the Civil War to assist former slaves in the South in the aftermath of the war, was unceremoniously defunded and shuttered about seven years after the agency opened.

The commission seeks

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to address racial disparities in housing, public education and the criminal justice system through specific policy reforms and may also recommend additional funding for Black colleges and universities and a constitutional amendment to cement voters' rights.

In a letter to President Obama, the group called White supremacy and racism deadly diseases infecting the social, economic and political fabric of the nation.

"As you have related Mr. President, despite progress since the era of enslavement, Jim Crow and de facto discrimination/segregation, the 'badges and indicia' of the longstanding exploitation and oppression of people of African descent are reflected in the devastating disparities in health, education, housing, employment, economic development, wealth and incarceration rates which harm large numbers of

Black people each and every day in this land of enormous prosperity," the letter said.

It continued, "Despite these realities, polls and studies indicate that a substantial number of White Americans fail to see or are in denial about the stubborn persistence of racism and its effects on Black people. In fact, there is a tendency to blame Blacks for the conditions our people find themselves in and/or to express 'racial resentment' of the perceived progress of Blacks, as being a function of encroaching on the success of Whites. Even among well meaning, sympathetic Whites, there is often a failure to recognize how implicit bias colors the countless decisions which constrain or kill the aspirations of Black people in this nation."

Instead of becoming more optimistic about race relations after the election of the nation's first Black president, a joint survey

conducted by the Pew Research Center (PRC) and USA Today in August 2014 found that Black respondents have grown more pessimistic.

"Majorities of Blacks (64 percent) and Whites (75 percent) say the two races get along at least pretty well, though fewer blacks express this view than did so four years ago (76 percent)," a report on the survey said. "In 2007, 69 percent of Blacks said Blacks and Whites get along very well or pretty well."

In the same poll Black and White respondents expressed contrasting views on the performance of local police departments.

"Fully 70 percent of Blacks say police departments around the country do a poor job in holding officers accountable for misconduct; an identical percentage says they do a poor job of treating racial and ethnic groups equally," the survey respondents reported. "And 57 percent of African Americans think police departments do a poor job of using the right amount of force."

Just 27 percent of Whites said that police departments do a poor job holding officers accountable and 23 percent of Whites said that police forces do a poor job using the right amount of force.

Nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of White respondents said that police officers do a good or fair

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Proposed Action Plan Will Bring Affordable Housing To Neighborhoods Across The City

On Monday, Seattle Mayor Ed Murray and Seattle City Councilmember Mike O'Brien unveiled an agreement that will lead to at least 50,000 new homes in Seattle, including 20,000 affordable homes, over the next 10 years.

"As Seattle expands and experiences rapid economic growth, more people are chasing a limited supply of housing. We are facing our worst housing affordability crisis in decades," said Murray. "My vision is a city where people who work in Seattle can afford to live here. Housing affordability is just one building block to a more equitable city. It goes hand in hand with our efforts on raising the minimum wage, providing preschool education for low-income children, and increasing access to parks and transit. We all share a responsibility in making Seattle affordable. Together, this plan will take us there."

At the heart of the action plan to make Seattle affordable is Mandatory Inclusionary Housing, a requirement that developers reserve five to seven

percent of units in every new multifamily building to be affordable for residents earning up to 60 percent of King County's Area Median Income (AMI). Developers could opt to contribute to a fund for off-site construction of the units.

"Since 2013, the City Council has called for a robust, citywide, mandatory affordable housing program to help ensure that the people who work in this city can afford to live here," said O'Brien. "The combination of Mandatory Inclusionary Housing and a Commercial Linkage Fee will ensure that as Seattle continues to grow, we are creating housing for all incomes."

In 2015, 60 percent of AMI is \$37,680 for an individual and \$53,760 for a family of four. Current market-rate rents in new buildings on Seattle's Capitol Hill currently average \$1,887. In 2015, individuals with incomes of 60 percent of AMI pay \$1,008 for income-restricted apartments.

According to the agreement, new buildings will have taller height restrictions in existing

multifamily residential, mixed-use and commercial zones throughout the city. A substantial portion of the additional development will occur within the existing Urban Centers and Urban Villages, designated two decades ago as the preferred location for denser housing. Only single-family zoning within Urban Villages and along major arterials will be converted to low-rise residential.

The action plan also includes a Commercial Linkage Fee on new commercial development, phased in over three years, to fund additional affordable housing for the lowest-income families. The linkage fee will range from \$5 to \$14 per square foot, based on the size and location of the commercial development.

When fully implemented, it is estimated that the Mandatory Inclusionary Housing and the Commercial Linkage Fee will lead to the construction of at least 6,000 new affordable homes over 10 years.

After 10 months of work, the Housing Affordability and Livability

Agenda (HALA) advisory committee delivered 65 recommendations to the mayor. The consensus-driven proposal was crafted by a 28-member committee of affordable housing advocates, community voices, developers and housing experts appointed by the mayor and Seattle City Council last September.

"We were asked by the mayor and council to offer bold, new concepts in our approach to solving the affordable housing crisis," said HALA co-chairs David Wertheimer and Faith Li Pettis. "We think this plan fully delivers on that request. We were able to complete our task because we approached the challenge with a single, shared goal: to make Seattle affordable for all families. None of us got exactly the solution we may have envisioned at the outset, and every one of us had to give a little to reach this landmark agreement."

According to the City, about 45,000 households in Seattle spend more than half their incomes on housing. An estimated 2,800 people sleep outside

each night in Seattle. Currently, about 700 income-restricted homes are built in Seattle each year.

The increased development capacity across the city will ensure increase supply of housing to respond to growing demand, as Seattle is forecast to add 120,000 residents over the next 20 years.

Doubling of Housing Levy in 2016

To meet the needs of the Seattle's lowest-income residents, those earning less than 30 percent of AMI, HALA also proposes to double the existing \$145 million Seattle Housing Levy scheduled to expire in 2016. Over the past 30 years, the levy has funded \$400 million to build and preserve nearly 12,000 units of affordable housing.

In 2015, 30 percent of AMI is \$18,850 for an individual or \$26,900 for a family of four.

This year, the City will award a record \$42 million from the Housing Levy and the existing Incentive Zoning program for the development and preservation of low-income

housing. The Seattle Office of Housing will issue project guidelines and invite partner applications later this week.

The HALA report also urges the Washington State Legislature to allow Seattle to adopt a 0.25 percent real estate excise tax dedicated to affordable housing development, as well as an increase in the State Housing Trust Fund.

To support moderate-income families, HALA recommends expanding the Multifamily Property Tax Exemption Program (MFTE) that is set to expire at the end of the year. Under MFTE, developers receive a tax exemption when they dedicate 20 percent of units in new buildings for moderate-income people, typically between 65 percent and 85 percent of AMI. HALA proposes to expand the program to all areas where multifamily housing can be built and incorporate a new incentive for three-bedroom units to extend program benefits to larger moderate-income families.

In 2015, 80 percent AMI is \$65,800 for a family of four.