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The Lancaster Urban League: Much to do with little means

The Lancaster Urban League (LUL) first began operations in 1965. As stated on the LUL website, their current mission is to serve “African-Americans, the poor, the disadvantaged, and other minorities” through programs ranging from technology training to health services.

Working out of their S. Duke St base, the LUL spreads their far-reaching influence into diverse realms of Lancaster City life.

From the S. Duke headquarters, the LUL also provides the Integrated Employment Program, which assists adults in searching for jobs, creating resumes, and even provides bus passes to keep the pursuit of employment as smooth as possible.

Also at headquarters, the LUL houses an internet-connected computer lab, which serves

over 500 individual community members each year. The lab is used during school hours to teach adults basic computer and web search skills and also serves as a hub for GED test preparation.

After school hours, the lab is open to neighborhood children as a place for tutoring, homework, research, and some free activity.

Project Hope is a division of the LUL that aims to reduce the impact of HIV/AIDS in the surrounding community. Testing, counseling, education, and free contraceptives are just a few of the ways that Project Hope fights the spread and the effects of this local epidemic.

A drop in funding has painfully limited the LUL’s capacity to provide services that fully match the needs they see around them. Currently, the LUL has to run on a staff of five.

Freedom to speak, yes; Freedom to peddle, no.

In a May 24th Letter to the Editor of the *Sunday News* headed “Ballpark ambush”, Joy Schwanger writes: “At the front gates people approach you, stating that if you give them your name and phone number you will be entered to win a free car. What they don’t tell you is you give them your information, it will be sold to a company called Sundance Vacations, which will relentlessly call you trying to ‘give’ you free vacations.”

While handing out newsletters at Clipper

Stadium, *NewsLanc* observed representatives with “Sundance Vacations” on their shirts collecting names and addresses. So long as *NewsLanc* is on public property, it is exercising its “Freedom of Speech” rights. But we know of no similar Constitutional protection for conducting a business on public property.

The Barnstormers should take appropriate action before the ball park becomes a flea market.

LookingAtLancaster.Com: Projects concealed until too late

For the past decade, Lancaster has seen more dramatic changes than at any time since the disastrous “Urban Renewal” projects of the 1960s and 1970s.

An example of this kind of project is the “streetscape improvement” program which is currently under way in downtown Lancaster. Several years ago, Lancaster City borrowed well over \$100 million to finance Federally-mandated improvements to its water treatment system. Without public debate, this bond sale included millions of additional dollars for unrelated projects. For example, desperately needed fire trucks have been purchased, to replace old equipment that had become expensive to maintain.

Several million dollars have been put aside to repair or replace the more than a century old City Hall, which fails to meet many building codes. These projects were described in general terms to City Council, which approved the bond sale without knowing the details of the city administration’s plans.

But “*streetscape improvements*” are not a requirement of local government. Sidewalks are normally the responsibility of the property owner; local government only has the responsibility to set safety and maintenance standards, and to make certain that those standards are maintained. In the only public review of this project, an outline of the “streetscape improvement district” along with a few conceptual drawings was presented to City Council, which easily approved the proposal.

But once construction began, the shortcomings of the “streetscape improvements” quickly became painfully apparent: most downtown intersections are receiving “bulb-outs” that

restrict the movement of traffic, something that was barely mentioned in the brief presentation to City Council. These “*traffic calming*” devices (a favorite of the current administration) are designed to make crossing the street easier for pedestrians, but existing downtown traffic congestion has already been made much worse as a result.

Another project where the public has been kept at a distance is the proposed streetcar system in downtown Lancaster. When questions about its operational funding became a significant stumbling block, a “private” non-profit corporation (made up primarily of government officials and civic leaders) was formed to take ownership of the project. With no involvement by City Council, three antique trolley cars were purchased; one was repainted, and in October of 2008 was parked on City-owned property at a major downtown intersection for all to see (as of this writing, it is still there).

Then there is the taxpayer-financed hotel and convention center project, where serious questions raised by Lancaster residents were met with ridicule and attacks from the public officials and private interests that support the project.

There has clearly been a pattern of restricting public input about potentially controversial taxpayer-funded projects in Lancaster. Significant but unnecessary projects costing huge sums of taxpayer dollars have been constructed without any meaningful input from the people who must pay the bills, and will forever live with the consequences. The political leaders of Lancaster have demonstrated time and again that they believe their pet projects are more important than the people who they were elected or appointed to represent.

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