‘2020 VISION’

Together Baton Rouge launches Civic Academy Series

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By the end of Together Baton Rouge’s Tuesday afternoon launch of its Civic Academy Series — aimed at educating participants on relevant social issues and the best way to address them — more than 300 people had been committed to taking part in the advocacy group’s next effort.

“St. Mary Baptist Church: I pledge 20,” said Dorothy Thomas, adding that she expects that number to increase as she continues to recruit participants from her congregation. The room at St. Paul the Apostle Catholic Church broke into applause.

Then a member of Ebenezer Baptist Church pledged six. More claps followed. The pledges continued, from other churches and civic organizations across East Baton Rouge.

Parish, as representatives promised to bring fellow members to the first meeting of the civic series in late August, which will focus on wealth, poverty and property taxes.

Together Baton Rouge plans to highlight five topics and each month address one with information and then a relevant action plan. The second meeting plans to focus on public education, the third on criminal justice and police reform, then access to health care and healthy food, and finally flood recovery and prevention. Each issue plays into Together Baton Rouge’s 2020 vision to bring change to the parish, leaders said.

Thomas said she expects members of her congregation to find something that appeals to them.

“When they see this and see what it’s about, at least one of these pertains to them,” Thomas said. “I think we’ll get a lot (of interest).” The Rev. Lee Wesley, of Community Bible Baptist Church, said the series was created after Together Baton Rouge leaders realized that many people were eager to bring change but did not have the tools or knowledge to make it happen.

“We discovered as we were addressing the issues in the community, people were not even aware of what created these issues,” Wesley said. “So we came to the conclusion we need to educate people on these issues. Then it was, how can we weave this into one vision?”

At the launch luncheon Tuesday, leaders gave a snippet about what the monthly series planned to address. The poverty session will focus on how Louisiana’s Industrial Tax Exemption Program has affected the economic success of the parish, specifically looking at how the region around booming ExxonMobil remains a low-income, high-crime area.

The public education session will focus on educators’ salaries, hoping to ensure their incomes are tied to inflation. The criminal justice academy will center on drug arrests, ensuring drug enforcement is fairly executed across the parish. And the health segment will work on getting fresh, healthy food options closer to all residents, ensuring the implementation of a fresh food initiative passed in July by the parish Metro Council. The launch event did not give a plan for the flood session.

The civic academies will be held in the evenings with three separate dates per topic, each date in a different location across the city — one in the south, one central and one in what Together Baton Rouge leaders are calling uptown.

“I think people are excited,” Wesley said. “I think they want to learn, they want to be involved, and they want to be involved in such a way that (we) end up making an actual change in our community. Knowledge is powerful; a lot of power will be required to bring about the needed changes in our city.”

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