



## The People's Agenda

Paterson

*January 2021*

For the past year, residents and news organizations in three New Jersey cities, including Paterson, have gathered to break bread, listen to each other and discuss priorities and concerns in their communities as part of a project called Voting Block.

This was the second time the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University has coordinated Voting Block, a project intended to amplify underrepresented voices. The 2019-2020 program was focused in Paterson, Newark and Camden. In each city, small groups of residents shared meals and discussed issues that mattered to them. The dinners connected people of diverse ages, ethnicities, religion, political leanings and priorities – people who otherwise might never connect. It also connected journalists to community members they might not ordinarily cover.

At each dinner, residents discussed what they like and love about the cities they call home and listened to each other suggest priorities and improvements. City Councilwoman At-Large Lilisa Mimms joined the third and final dinner in Paterson. Topics included education, public safety, quality of life, youth recreation and leadership accountability. There was disagreement and unexpected common ground. Accusations turned into opportunities to see others' perspectives and pledges to help each other do better.

Journalists also participated in the conversations, fielding complaints about their coverage while at the same time seizing the opportunity to address those complaints by listening to new points of view, connecting to new sources and building lasting relationships. Journalists and residents themselves produced stories based on the conversations they had and the connections they made.

Throughout Voting Block, we knew that one of the outcomes we wanted for the project was the creation of a **People's Agenda**: an agenda that we could present to lawmakers that was built entirely upon what Patersonians said they wanted to see happen in their city.

In the weeks before and immediately after the election, we checked back in with our Voting Block neighbors to make sure the priorities they expressed during those dinners still rang true.

On behalf of those residents and Voting Block, we respectfully ask you to consider these priorities as you continue to lead this city through the second wave of the pandemic and beyond.

# ▲ The People's Agenda ▲

The following items were compiled from longtime Patersonians who participated in Voting Block.

## EDUCATION

*Two main themes emerged from the voters who cited education-related issues as their main priority: an outdated and whitewashed social studies curriculum that fails to engender any sense of community or cultural pride, and a lack of youth recreational opportunities to help kids see other options besides the streets and sports.*

“Why don’t we revamp the social studies curriculum to include Paterson pride? The purpose is for the students to understand heritage so they can change the narrative from negative to positive. Reform is important as it relates to students understanding the connections between their existence and their environment.” —Tanya W.

“I’m struck by the very nice sense of community I found here but also struck by the lack of resources that the kids have, especially when you travel to other high schools in the area. Compared to our high school it’s shocking. Every child deserves an equal opportunity.” —Faatimah H.

“Being able to have that voice and have that choice should be all our parents’ No. 1 concern. Everyone is worried about college tuition, but we don’t have the means to make sure our kids are prepared to go to college in K-12.” —Ashley C.

## PUBLIC SAFETY

*Bottom line: residents of Paterson don’t feel safe. They don’t see police doing an adequate job. More importantly, they see the lack of emotional support, financial education and recreational opportunities for young people perpetuating the problem for generations to come.*

“I’ve lived in Paterson more than 40 years. I live in the Towers and it’s not so great. You basically have to just pray that when you come outside that it’s not your last time you’re walking out of the building. My concern is what we can do to eliminate gangbangers in our neighborhood and drug dealers. My first thought was to put the police back on the beat because without the police presence they do whatever they want.” —Doreen J.

“I know that the public schools in Paterson have financial education as part of the curriculum. But I don’t think it’s enough. Nobody gets into the drug trade because they want to be a drug dealer. They get into it because they want to make quick fast money. That quick fast money they can make a plethora of other ways. In the free time I have, I mentor and tutor at-risk youth in Paterson and they don’t know anything about how to invest their money. They see the only opportunity to make money is getting a job or the streets. If we can educate especially the young people and show them another life, another way of making money that would decrease the crime. It would decrease the drug trade.” —Sebastian M.

A lot of people in Paterson face trauma every day in the streets at their home and we have to find a way to address it. Young kids should be screened for adverse childhood experiences. If we find kids that have these we need to deal with it immediately. Kids going into middle school need incredible recreational opportunities: bowling, dance. The high school students could be employed to offer this supervision. Keep these young kids out of the gang and the underground economy. Without that we’re just going to keep having people drift.”

—Faatimah H.

## QUALITY OF LIFE

*Driving down some Paterson streets makes many residents sad, especially when they see landmark buildings such as current and former libraries that should be beacons for the community sitting vacant or surrounded by empty, trash-filled lots, boarded up buildings or liquor stores.*

“Urban gardening creates a sense of community, which in many sections of this town there’s a lack of. Once you see life growing in your community, you’re going to think twice about bringing death into your community.”

—Sebastian M.

“I’m socialized to believe that it’s OK to have this many liquor stores in my neighborhood. In one area, we have an overabundance of liquor stores. We’re talking in a 1.5-mile neighborhood, we have eight liquor stores.”

—Andre A.

## LEADERSHIP ACCOUNTABILITY

“Our trust in our leaders is very broken. Nepotism, I’d like to see dealt with. Voter fraud, I’d like to see dealt with. Corruption in general has become problematic in this city. It hurts. It’s personal when the people that are in positions of power that you trust to care, don’t. You wonder how much longer are we going to see people who are unqualified for good paying jobs receive them? There are plenty of opportunities that could’ve gone to Patersonians that don’t. What has changed, what is better than it was two years ago? More people are being shot. Everything seems more corrupt than ever. The schools lost teachers. I want to know that our leaders are meaningfully doing work and that we can trust them.” —Elizabeth V.

## YOUTH RECREATION

*Residents reminisced about how sports and the arts changed the course of their lives and the lives of their children. Competitive boxers, football players, basketball moms and artists all shared their dismay that Paterson did not offer nearly enough outlets for children to express themselves, tap into their talents and dress the wounds caused by trauma.*

“They should set up a strike force for children in Paterson. If kids are under a lot of stress, their brains don’t actually form properly and they can’t learn. Paterson needs to have recreation for every single child. Schools should be updated with the best gymnasiums, lots of athletic fields, we should hire high school students, actually train them and let them earn money helping with these recreation programs, and that’s an emergency. It needs to be done immediately.” —Faatimah H.

“Gangbangers are children. They are from 11 to 16. They are babies. Where do they get these guns? They still need as much help as the ones already in school. They need to learn that they are loved unconditionally in order to help them.” —Doreen J.

“I was a kid on the brink of the school-to-prison pipeline. I witnessed that first thing in Paterson in the 70s where I was taken out of regular elementary school because whatever the teacher viewed was combative, they had to isolate me and many other students and put us in a classroom that was designed for kids that were on the verge of going to a youth corrective facility. What I can say I really love about Paterson as a boxer from 12 up to 25, I was proud of being from Paterson. The best fighters came out of Paterson.” —Andre A.

“Sports is something that’s essential. I can recall being in school and got in trouble when it wasn’t football season. When football season came around, I was good. How ‘bout addressing the school to prison pipeline? I

was put in handcuffs at the age of 8 at school over a fight with another child. That obviously affected me. We need to address the trauma.” —Marquise M.

## **LEGALIZATION OF MARIJUANA AND DRUG REHABILITATION**

*Voters expressed concern that Paterson is home to one of the few drug rehabilitation centers in Passaic County because other suburban governments will not approve such facilities. As a result, when suburban law enforcement agencies make drug arrests, they bring people to Paterson without compensating the city for offering this service.*

“How ‘bout laying off these guys with dime and nickel bags and focusing on the real problems?” —Gemelly C.

“I grew up in Bergen County in a wealthy area and I had a drug problem as a teenager. I’d come to Paterson to buy cocaine all the time because it was easy. But when Haledon drops off people because we have a needle exchange that other places don’t. We have rehabilitation centers that other places don’t. ... We’re taking all of your people, but you’re not giving us money. If your police officer is going to bring your criminal to my city, I want \$10,000 for that person.” —Elizabeth V.