



Power-Building Virtual Roundtable
Sunday, September 19, 2021, 3 PM - 4:30 PM, via Zoom

Summary

We have progressive momentum since the spring elections. Where do we go from here?

From Evanston to Highland Park and all suburbs in between, grassroots groups have mobilized for a seat at the political table on issues ranging from affordable housing and police accountability, to government transparency.

How do social justice causes get support from elected officials? How do we create a culture of collaboration between grassroots groups and City Hall?

We hosted this Roundtable for local activists to share strategies and build the movement. We envision this to be the first of quarterly Justice Project regional gatherings.

Thirty people attended from 11 northern suburbs. The Roundtable was facilitated by Pastor Allison Bengfort, who acknowledged the other Justice Project Steering Committee members on the call: Bev Copeland, Debbie De Palma, Patrick Hanley, and Gail Schechter.

Following a land acknowledgement read by Bev, the agenda was divided into three parts:

1. **Gain inspiration and ideas** from progressive new legislator **Trustee Heather Ross** (Northbrook) and **Rick Marsh** of the powerhouse new grassroots group Community Alliance for Better Government in Evanston, on changing systems for the better and for good
2. **Roundtable: Hear grassroots leaders share priorities and challenges** in a suburban roundtable format where you have an opportunity to participate
3. **Build regional relationships with like-minded people** in breakout groups

These notes summarize key points of the first and second parts, and the next steps outlined at the end.

Heather Ross and Rick Marsh: Supporting Progressives in City Hall

Trustee Heather Ross of Northbrook, who made the transition from a grassroots activist to an elected official, briefly shared with the group about what she has learned being now on the "inside" about what works and what doesn't in advocacy to the Village Board.

- Adding just two people, including herself, to the Board of Trustees **changed the culture** of the Northbrook Village Board. For example, individuals who had been quietly on the fence about affordable housing felt emboldened to show their support.
- Heather found that the Trustees were more **collaborative** than she had initially expected.
- She learned that “**listening** to someone allows them to listen to **you**.” This holds whether it’s a trustee talking to another trustee, or in interactions with constituents.
- **One-on-one meetings** with constituents can be fruitful. Unless the meeting is explicitly for a group, don’t bring seven people, say, if the expectation was one or two.
- To win on an issue like affordable housing, it’s important to show how **everyone** benefits.
- The Village Board has instituted a “**Diversity and Equity Moment**” at the beginning of each Board meeting, and **partners with the grassroots group** RAIN (Racial Awareness in the Northshore) to deliver it.

Rick Marsh of [Community Alliance for Better Government](#) in Evanston described how CABG started as a protest campaign (in late 2019) against the unfair firing of Kevin Brown, staff leader respected throughout Evanston. The firing revealed several fault lines in City government around racial equity, secret decisions, and lack of respect for residents. It grew into an organization dedicated to electing progressives to City Government and succeeded not only in electing a new mayor and two new Alderpersons in April, but in building a well-recognized movement.

- It’s important to **build relationships**. CABG’s leadership has met with the mayor(s) and key City staff.
- **Endorsing candidates** was controversial at first, but it led to recognition and accountability between CABG, the candidates, and members.
- A movement grows when the campaign **meets regularly**. CABG holds open monthly meetings, has a leadership team, and several committees such as Education & Advocacy. CABG also models the transparency it advocates by posting its Platform and leadership on its website.
- CABG **monitors every City Council meeting** and speaks out.
- Having the **attention of the press** is essential. CABG issues press releases and holds press conferences, and has become a go-to entity for reporters.
- CABG “**drives** initiatives.”

Advice for The Justice Project from Heather & Rick

How do you think The Justice Project itself (with its regional approach) could most effectively support progressive change in individual communities and through issue-oriented coalitions?

- **Create subgroups** and committees of The Justice Project
- “We need to talk more, community to community. We must be **collaborative**.”
- The Justice Project could be a source for **sharing** of comments and ideas -- to get the word out.

Roundtable: Community Sharing

Individuals from different suburbs shared highlights of their work.

Park Ridge: The grassroots group Action Ridge has been advocating for years for affordable housing. After seemingly winning a small victory in getting affordable housing included in the Comprehensive Plan, the planner was fired. The group is hopeful about the new planner who is from Highland Park, an affordable housing line leader. Action Ridge also holds racial equity educational programs. In addition, WTTW will be filming their efforts!

Morton Grove: Vision Morton Grove is focused on getting the Village to adopt a diversity plan. Eventually, they would like to elect progressive trustees. Go Green Morton Grove has also just launched, having had a successful Sustainability Expo earlier in the month.

Wilmette: Pastor Allison described the Wilmette Sacred Organizing Learning Community for lay leaders of Wilmette congregations interested in social action.

Winnetka: Laura Connell and Pastor Bill Evertsberg of Kenilworth Union Church are focused on educating white churches about racial equity and striving to make their congregations diverse. They recently read *Caste* and are planning a civil rights pilgrimage in 2022 to Selma.

Glenview: Having no luck in getting the Glenview Village Board to support inclusionary, mixed-income housing, Sue Gregory proposes that action come through the whole region, specifically in outreach to congregations to site affordable housing. She is proposing that The Justice Project create a database of all past congregation-based developments; lay out options that have worked; and create a development and financing strategy.

Highland Park: Since establishing Curt's Cafe in Highland Park, the Justice Team is looking to work in coalition. Through Gail, they were introduced to Jordan Kane of Color of Equity and are excited about their work to end racial profiling practices by police. They have also been in conversation with the director of the Art Center, and they are interested in "Community Dinners" in which families invite people they don't know. In Reform Judaism, it's known as [audacious hospitality](#).

Skokie: A written update was shared: "Suburban Solidarity Network is a mutual aid group that believes every person is vulnerable and powerful. We have continued to do monthly produce pop ups serving at least 40 families with fresh fruits and veggies each month, facilitated neighborhood land sharing and gardening skills cooperatives, made infographics about alternatives to calling the police in Skokie, and distributed info about pod mapping and transformative justice strategies at a recent antiracist play date. Exciting news—we are merging with a local group focused on alternatives to policing! Main focuses right now: abolition, alternative community care networks, antiracist education."

Niles: The Niles Coalition successfully mobilized a campaign to save the Niles Library from cuts by newly-elected right-wingers. Their overall goal is to create the Beloved Community in Niles.

Northbrook: RAIN (Racial Awareness in the Northshore) is holding educational events and the "diversity and equity moment" at every Northbrook Village Board meeting.

Feedback about the Roundtable!

The following are quotes from the Zoom chat.

- *What did you learn? like best?*
 - We're not alone! Alotta common causes.
 - updates on what's happening in each community; insight from new "insiders"
 - I'm leaving so energized to see so many like-minded organizations working in Chicagoland!
 - Learning what other suburbs/communities are doing.
 - Hearing about what other groups are doing.
 - Heather's tips on approaching trustee discussions 1 on 1
 - network with neighboring communities
 - Hope! Tips about how to effect change
 - I was very inspired by what is going on in the suburbs. Great meeting a neighbor from Niles.
 - learning what other organizations are doing; hearing Heather's "before" and "after"
 - I connected with someone who knows about ADU's which Northbrook is discussing. I am also interested in faith community action and would like to see faith coalitions across town boundaries.
 - I was interested in what each community is doing and will be glad to get the email addresses of participants so that we can follow up. We needed more time in the breakout rooms to share info.
 - It is very valuable to be encouraged by knowing that others are actively involved in trying to do the right thing educationally, politically, socially, and otherwise. It is helpful to know that persons are fighting for real justice. Thanks to all of you!
 - Just meeting folks from other communities and learning about how they have gone about making their communities more progressive.
- *What did you think of the format?*
 - I thought the balance was good
 - I thought the format was great, but perhaps at some point we could divide up by issue area?
 - Need to focus on justice work and not just service work. Need to figure out how to use media. Need to keep working w/municipalities but there are other channels, like faith communities and interfaith groups.
- *What didn't you like? What would you change?*
 - Nothing. I liked/loved it all!
 - More time on individual suburbs
 - I don't have any specific thing that was not helpful to me.
 - Would like to meet more people from the different communities. Either more breakout groups or introductions for everyone involved.
 - I appreciated both the reports from communities and the breakouts!
 - This topic is so broad. How to focus?
 - I was happy to hear from Gia, connecting our GoGreen groups are doing as an integral part of Justice
 - Everything I hoped it would be!
 - Breakouts by topic

- More time in the breakout sessions, please.
- I just wish people respected time limits better.
- Powerful to be collaborative!
- maybe a bit larger breakout group
- I thought it was terrific! Loved the format including all the sharing from each community!
- I like the idea of breakouts by topic too!
- How do we map out who is the contact person in each community.
- While I think the meeting was informative, I don't feel the purpose was well defined in advance.
- Overall it was truly great. I appreciated it.

Next Steps

- Stay tuned for dates for the next Quarterly Meeting.
- The Justice Project Steering Committee will share the contact list with all who attended.
- If you are interested in participating in regional outreach to faith communities in support of affordable housing, contact Sue Gregory, sgregnew@gmail.com

Together as the Justice Project, we are a force for the [Welcoming Community!](#)