

Interfaith Federation touts transportation, jobs agenda

HAMMOND: Group asks politicians to pledge support for its platform

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#### ADVERTISEMENT

HAMMOND | It had the tone of an old-fashioned church meeting, complete with prayers and hymns, but what the Interfaith Federation delivered was a call to action focusing on transportation, economic development and jobs.

Nearly 600 people attended Interfaith Federation's 11th annual public meeting at St. John Bosco Catholic Church, bringing together black, white and Hispanic residents of Lake and Porter counties.

The federation is a faith-based organization that focuses on creating equity and destroying concentrated poverty by effecting a change in public policies and institutions. On Sunday, the group called on local politicians to support its platform or face voters in the fall.

The Rev. Asher Harris, president of the Interfaith Federation and pastor of Great Band Missionary Baptist Church in Gary, expressed some concern about the pre-apprenticeship program funded by Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels' Major Moves project.

"The federation launched a ready-to-work campaign after hearing that young adults couldn't pass the drug test," he said.

"This is not just happening in our communities but throughout Northwest Indiana and the world. The lack of jobs is a problem," Harris said.

After researching the issues, Harris said the federation learned that blacks and Latinos are under-represented in trade unions in Northwest Indiana.

He called on local politicians to support a measure providing one-half of 1 percent of all dollars allocated for trades' apprenticeship programs, based on the amount proposed by the federal government. Known as the Safetea-Lu Transportation bill, it was supported by U.S. Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill.

Lake County passed a 1 percent tax on food and beverages sold in restaurants and taverns in 2002. The Indiana Legislature approved the measure three years later, but it has yet to be enacted in Lake County.

Harris wants to see the measure enacted and put toward the Regional Bus Authority.

Kenneth Dallmeyer, project director for the Northwest Indiana Regional Bus Authority, said the bus transportation study is half complete, and the first part has focused on looking at ways to measure the need for services in Lake County.

Regional Bus Authority President Dennis Rittenmeyer said there are nearly 10 systems in Lake and Porter counties that "trap" residents in their own communities, and the project can't be realized without funding.

The Rev. David Blakely, who was a member of a delegation that toured the Gulf Coast in August, said a year after the levee broke in New Orleans' 9th Ward, authorities still are finding bodies and the area still is devastated.

"We want to help restore opportunities for the people in the Gulf Coast," he said.