

Keeping Faith in Austin

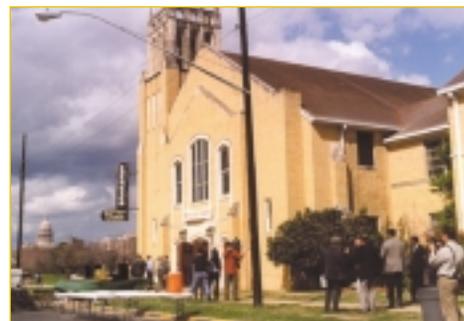
In recent years, residents of East Austin, Texas, have been somewhat overwhelmed by the parade of federal programs and economic development initiatives in their community, each promising much and delivering little. Rebuild Austin and the Ebenezer Baptist Church (EBC) are hoping to challenge this precedent. Led by EBC and its nonprofit organization, the East Austin Economic Development Corporation (EAEDC), Rebuild Austin embraces the idea that energy efficiency can provide a catalyst for community improvement through building economically strong, healthy, energy-efficient and sustainable neighborhoods.

Setting an Example

Nationally, community involvement by Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) is increasing, with religious institutions taking on a larger role in economic, social and political issues. In East Austin, EBC has emerged as a force, encouraging economic development, initiating job creation and providing renewed hope for the community by bridging the gap between the city's elite and the disadvantaged. EBC is helping to lead a spiritual reaffirmation by churches nationwide that dictates a greater stewardship of the earth and taking responsibility for preserving its resources.

More than 100 years ago, in 1875, EBC was founded as the Third Baptist Congregation. As one of the oldest and most respected

institutions in the community, EBC formed the EAEDC in 1988 to help guide the economic development aspects of its mission. Utilizing their congregation's initiative, commitment and financial resources, the EAEDC began combating the overt signs of decay by buying property around the church, demolishing collapsing structures and planning new developments. The church's efforts now account for more than two city blocks of revitalization in East Austin, including a 25,000-square-foot day care and elder care center and a 12-unit housing facility for senior citizens. Future plans call for converting an abandoned frame house into the Ebenezer Village Energy Training and Demonstration Center.



Ebenezer Baptist Church, the heart of the East Austin community that has helped launch the efforts of local redevelopment.

Building Upon Community Trust

FBOs are in a unique position to promote and manage federal, state and community programs, as oftentimes they have an easier

PARTNERSHIP FACTS:

- **Targeted Buildings:**
Commercial and Churches
- **Estimated Square Footage:**
Two city blocks of revitalization efforts
- **New and Notable Innovations:**
Using Faith Based Organizations to help bring communities together by buying local property then selling it, reinvesting the profits into future projects

time reaching residents and motivating them into participation. I.Q. Hurdle, EAEDC's Project Director, says, "The East Austin neighborhood is more receptive to investing in the community's future through Rebuild Austin and EAEDC because they already trust the church's leadership."

"In the past, not all government programs or economic development interests have delivered on their promises, [therefore] some residents are bound to be distrustful. By working through a church-based neighborhood organization, neighborhood homeowners and businesses trust our group to understand common concerns about housing, utility bills and future economic growth—and then deliver on our promises," says Hurdle.

The Transformation of a Community

At many lending institutions, a FBO's community standing can be transformed into credit at local banks. In Austin, the EAEDC has benefited from their association with EBC and has been financed to complete building renovations and invest in small business development.

"With the Church as a lead agent in putting together these deals," says Van Johnson, President of the EAEDC, "we have more credibility with the banks. They are willing to take greater risks with our projects."

Like many cities, the typical housing stock found in Austin's lower-income neighborhoods is energy inefficient, resulting in high utility costs that strain family budgets. EAEDC has worked hard to alleviate this burden. Since 1998, more than 20 area homes have been

renovated and sold, the profits being reinvested into the EAEDC to cover operating costs and additional projects. The renovations included the installation of energy-efficient air conditioners, windows and doors.



US DOE Secretary Bill Richardson (center) taking a tour of East Austin with local citizens.

The Rebuild America program could not be more in sync with Rebuild Austin's mindset. Mike Myers, Program Representative, says, "The two foundations to an economically vital neighborhood are good housing and a stable, supportive atmosphere for small business. With affordable senior housing [and] daycare, the church can start a chain reaction to revitalize the entire neighborhood."

Leading to Success

The partnership between Rebuild America, EAEDC, EBC and the East Austin community shows that FBOs can be a driving force behind increased energy efficiency, decreased utility bills and renewed community stability. "This effort demonstrates that energy efficiency can be used to revitalize an economically depressed neighborhood so that it can participate in the economic boom that so many communities across the nation are enjoying," states former U.S. DOE Secretary, Bill Richardson.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT REBUILD AUSTIN, CONTACT:

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