

“The Other Chicago” and the Red Line Extension Transit TIF – “We’re coming to get our check”

By Lou Turner¹

Next year is the 60th anniversary of the historic March on Washington. In the upcoming MLK holiday, we are sure to be inundated with Dr. King’s “I have a dream” speech in schools, churches, and public commemorations where public officials will invoke the “the dream” but conveniently forget “the check” that Dr. King ended his speech with.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on [its] promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked “insufficient funds.” But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So, we have come to cash this check — a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.

For his part, Dr. King never let “the dream” lull him to sleep and forget “the check.” In April 1967, he addressed the student body at Stanford University on “The Other America” of poverty, “the white backlash,” and America’s Vietnam war budget that defeated its “war on poverty” at home. In July 1967, amid the “long hot summer” of urban revolts, he again messaged “the check” owed to America’s Black and non-Black poor. In that speech in Charleston, South Carolina, he referred to Chicago’s segregated transportation planning that allowed white people in the metro area to circumvent the very sight of the poverty of Black residents on the South and West sides of the city. He further concretized “the check” with an economic agenda called the Freedom Budget that proposed a basic universal income, affordable housing, education reform, and a comprehensive workforce development plan. It was a revolutionary policy agenda. It still is. Finally, in 1968, shortly before his death, Dr. King exposed the glaring history of racial inequality, from Emancipation to today, to which the U.S. government subjected Black people, while providing white people with an economic floor from which they benefit to this today. All of this was part of King’s preparation for the Poor People’s March on Washington where “the check” was privileged over “the dream.” After reciting a litany of government-sponsored economic policies bolstering white people and institutions, such as land grant universities and farm subsidies, King told his poor, Black audience that the 1968 Poor People’s March on Washington meant, “We’re coming to get our check.”

Chicago played a critical role in this scenario of King’s evolution from civil rights to human economic rights, 1963 to 1968. In 1966, King was invited to come to Chicago by the Chicago Freedom Movement whose organizational affiliates coalesced in the CCCO (Coordinating Council of Community Organizations). Famously, Dr. King hammered the demands of the Chicago Freedom Movement on the door of Mayor Richard J. Daley’s City Hall. Recent research has found evidence that Harold (“Hal”) Baron, the Director of the Research Department of the Chicago Urban League (CUL) was the author of the social, political, and economic demands that King hammered on City Hall’s door. Hal Baron worked with King during his Chicago sojourn, supplying him research on the many social issues that Chicago’s apartheid system of structural racism had produced.

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Hal Baron authored or collaborated with CUL's research associates on such studies of Chicago sophisticated system of *de facto* racial segregation as: "Northern Segregation as a System: The Chicago Schools" (1965); "The Negro Worker in the Chicago Labor Market: A Case Study of *De Facto* Segregation" (with Bennett Hymer, 1965); "Public Housing: 'Chicago Builds a Ghetto'" (1967); "Black Powerlessness in Chicago" (with Harriet Shulman, Richard Rothstein and Rennard Davis, 1968); "The Racial Aspects of Urban Planning: [An Urban League Critique of the Chicago Comprehensive Plan (1968)]"; "The Web of Urban Racism" (1968); and "Building Babylon: A Case of Racial Controls in Public Housing" (1971). Under the auspices of the CUL, Baron was the original initiator of the famous Gautreaux housing desegregation case, considered the Brown Decision for housing discrimination. After leaving the CUL and following a short tenure at Northwestern University and teaching at the Associated Colleges of the Midwest, Baron went on to become the issues coordinator for the historic Harold Washington campaign and Chief Policy Advisor for Chicago's first Black mayor. [About | The Hal Baron Project \(illinois.edu\)](#)

Hal Baron passed away in January 2017. A colleague and I worked with Hal in the last years of his life on a book collection of his work and so had the opportunity to correspond and visit with him often. On one of my last visits to his and his wife Paula's North Side home, when Hal was under hospice care, I had a chance to speak to the young Black woman nurse who attended to him. I confess that it didn't come as a surprise when she told me that she had to take three buses and a train to get to work from the far South Side where I had worked for the community organization Developing Communities Project (DCP). DCP had spearheaded the Red Line Extension (RLE) project now underway by the CTA, the Department of Planning and Development (DPD), and CMAP (Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning). Importantly, the project has had the political fingerprints of the most consequential public figures of the last two decades of Chicago's political history on it, from Illinois Senate President Emil Jones, Jr., to Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr. to then-U.S. Senator Barack Obama, to Chicago's last two mayors, Rahm Emanuel, and Lori Lightfoot, who both ran on the Red Line Extension as their foremost community development infrastructure project.

Now in its twentieth year, the RLE has reached a new turning point. For the project to progress through its current planning phase to reach a Full Funding Grant Agreement, the Chicago City Council must pass the RLE Transit TIF, a piece of legislation that leverages 60 percent of the federal funding needed to construct the RLE through the City's worst transportation desert on the far South Side. Along with finally extending the CTA system to Chicago's South Side city limits, the project provides access to Riverdale, the most isolated community area in Chicago, especially to the residents of Altgeld Gardens who, according to the environmental justice organization People for Community Recovery, live in one of the most toxic lived environments in the nation.

In developing the RLE Transit TIF, DPD and the CTA have devised a novel transit equity funding mechanism that addresses, or perhaps better, reckons with Chicago's infamous racial past of planned apartheid segregation. The "cost of segregation" study and reform agenda that the Metropolitan Planning Council touted in 2017 ([The Cost of Segregation - Metropolitan Planning Council \(metroplanning.org\)](#)) has never been more prescient than when we consider what the "cost of segregation" has been for the far South Side of Chicago and what the RLE Transit TIF only begins to repair.

It is estimated that the RLE Transit TIF will generate \$950 million in tax increment revenue from the TIF within the designated TFIA (Transit Facility Improvement Area) over a 35-year period. The CTA calculates this as part of the local match to leverage \$2 billion in federal funding. Nevertheless, a salient question raised by some aldermen is critical, namely, if this is the City's part of the "state and local match" to leverage federal funding, what is the state of Illinois and Governor Pritzker's share of the match?

While some public officials, residents of the proposed RLE Transit TIF, and transit advocates have pushed back against this transit equity funding mechanism with questions like, "what do we get out of this?" Or, in terms of moral suasion, "We're sorry for the deleterious effects of Chicago's racist past, but we had nothing to do with that; and we don't see why we should have to pay for the racist outcomes Chicago's planning past." Answers to these questions are as simple as they are unapologetic. Chicago's Black South and West Side communities are as segregated today as when Dr. and Mrs. King moved into the West Side of Chicago in 1966 – more so. However, the more powerful response is the lived reality that the City Council seeks common cause to address, namely, the conditions that foster the current public safety crisis (read: "crime," especially on the CTA system) on the South and West Side.

The RLE project is more than just another CTA transportation project. It is project of racial reckoning with Chicago's apartheid past and present. In a 2005 study in which DCP partnered with University of Illinois at Chicago's Voorhees Center for Neighborhood and Community Improvement, led by its late Co-Director, Janet Smith, "The Case of Transit-Oriented Development in Greater Roseland," we first proposed the use of the transit TIF as the transit equity funding mechanism for the RLE ([Developing Communities Project \(uic.edu\)](#)). When the Springfield General Assembly passed transit TIF legislation in 2016, the Chicago City Council immediately passed the transit TIF for the North Side Red-Purple Modernization (RPM) project, 48-0. South Side aldermen should now expect (demand) North Side aldermen to reciprocate by supporting this most important infrastructure investment on the far South Side, an area that has suffered and endured the detrimental effects of Chicago's discriminatory history of "urban renewal" (sic) planning.

The second response to "What do we get from this?" push back against the RLE Transit TIF is the darker side of the "cost of segregation" in Chicago, namely, that the far South Side has already paid forward for the "cost of segregation" to the rest of Chicago. In our 2005 study, we calculated that Greater Roseland residents spent annually an estimated \$1.24 billion (\$340 million per square mile) on retail goods and services, with \$846 million spent *outside* the community due to the sheer economic underdevelopment of the area. When calculated against the one-time \$950 million in the RLE Transit TIF revenues generated over 35 years, consumer leakage in Greater Roseland over that same period, due to lack of economic development that would otherwise come with the RLE, comes to \$29.6 billion in consumer spending *outside* of the Greater Roseland community.

Nonetheless, the darkest side of the "cost of segregation" paid forward by the far South Side of Chicago exists at the 130th Street and Altgeld Gardens terminus of the RLE in the Riverdale community area. Altgeld Gardens and Riverdale is Chicago's poorest community area, and more than any other community area has sacrificed for "the rest of Chicago" by enduring incalculable environmental, healthcare, and mortality/morbidity ravages as the City's toxic waste site. Thus, to the question, "What do we get from it?" i.e., from the RLE Transit TIF, the answer is as stark as it is tragic: The rest of Chicago has already gotten more than it can possibly imagine from the hazardous environmental destruction of

Black lives compelled to inhabit what PCR calls a “toxic donut” ([Rise Up for Environmental Justice - People for Community Recovery](#)) [See photo of the Altgeld Gardens yellow brick “wall of respect” of residents who have died.]

Dr. King’s declaration that “We’re coming to get our check” bears remembrance this coming MLK holiday as we also commemorate the 60th anniversary of the March on Washington. However, perhaps a more sobering message from Dr. King should be kept in mind by the Chicago City Council as it weighs whether it will “do the right thing” and vote to pass the RLE Transit TIF or mire itself in the *quid pro quo* politics for which Chicago is known by counterposing issues like CTA scheduling and crime to funding a community development project of such social and historical significance as the RLE. In a 1967 speech to the American Psychological Association, entitled “The Role of the Behavioral Scientist in the Civil Rights Movement,” Dr. King lectured social scientists on the civic morality with which modern institutions should view such phenomena as the urban riots of the nation’s “long hot summers.” His words are as true and wise now as they were then:

A profound judgment of today’s riots was expressed by Victor Hugo a century ago. He said, “If a soul is left in the darkness, sins will be committed. The guilty one is not he who commits the sin, but he who causes the darkness.”