

Dudley Street area residents come to listen, then elect reps on board

By

**Filipe Miranda, Special to the Reporter
Dorchester Reporter**

Jul. 3, 2009

Close to 200 residents of Roxbury and Dorchester came to St. Patrick's Church last Wednesday evening to elect representatives for the board of directors of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI). One by one, the 42 candidates, spanning three generations and a wide range of cultural backgrounds, walked to the pulpit and asked for their community's support. And for nearly two hours, the residents in the crowd listened and marked their choices on the ballots.

It is unusual for a non-profit to invite an entire neighborhood to vote for its board members. At DSNI, however, the election process is an essential piece of its work.

Founded in 1985 by residents determined to fight the neglect and redlining that was destroying their neighborhood, the initiative invites all its neighbors to actively work for a healthier community. As members of the board of directors, the residents themselves determine the direction of the organization's efforts.

John Barros, a lifelong resident of the area who was the first youth to serve on the organization's board and is now its executive director, explains that placing community members at the head of the initiative, through a process that is transparent and open to all, empowers residents and ensures that the organization acts on the wishes of its members. The election forces candidates and board members to engage people, to hear the pulse of the community, and to be held accountable," Barros said.

The Dudley Street neighborhood is a multicultural, mostly low-income community, where a third of the population is under age 19. Comprised of four major cultural groups, white residents live side by side with Cape-Verdean, African-American, and Hispanic families. The initiative's board is structured to give every group a voice in the decision process, allotting four seats to each ethnic group, and three seats to youth residents, between 15 and 18 years old. The remaining 15 seats are reserved for community partners such as non-profits,

religious organizations, and local businesses.

The initiative's work to engage and empower the community has been credited with much of the Dudley Triangle's progress in recent years. Over its 25-year history, the organization has redeveloped 30 acres of vacant land that had previously been used as illegal dumping grounds into parks, community gardens, and affordable housing units. Its youth initiative provides 200 summer jobs for teenagers every year, and its recent voting drive registered 400 new voters, a 35 percent increase in some precincts.

On July 27, the initiative will celebrate another milestone as three years of planning and fundraising culminate in the beginning of the construction of the Salvation Army's Kroc center. Covering six and half acres, it will include athletic facilities, classrooms, a computer lab, and an auditorium, and be one the largest community centers in New England.