

Regional

Panel sees ESL as topic of hope, despair

East St. Louis, because of its crime rate, poverty and other political and socio-economic factors, is a city with one of the worst reputations in the country. But it wasn't always like this. In fact, East St. Louis was a vibrant industrial city that in the 1950s had three times the population as it has today. What happened? How did East St. Louis — at one point named an All-American city — become the embodiment of urban blight in America? And more importantly, is there any hope that in the future things will change?

To discuss this topic we recently gathered a panel of experts, each with extensive experience on the topic of East St. Louis. They were Andrew Theising, professor in the department of political science and director of the Institute for Urban Research at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville; Kathleen Thimsen of the Community Nursing Services of the School of Nursing at SIUE, who runs a community nursing program clinic in East St. Louis; Reginald Petty, a native and a local historian of East St. Louis and Edna Patterson Petty, a multimedia artist and art therapist who is a life-long resident of the city. For several of these experts, much of the decay can be traced back to the city being hit hard in the post-war economy of the 1950s.

"I would argue that it was because there was a very heavy reliance on industries that were no longer needed," said Theising. He added that while many American cities experienced industrial decline during that period, the magnitude of the decline was so much greater in East St. Louis than in many other communities.

That decay and the resulting lack of environmental controls led to serious health issues, added Thimsen.



Photo courtesy of Andrew Theising

A sign in East St. Louis from the middle of the 20th century.

"Children and the adult population both exhibit signs of allergies, COPD and asthma," she said. "The other environmental issue was the construction of houses prior to the 1970s. Most of those homes were built with infrastructure that contains lead and that causes toxicity and learning disabilities in children." For the historian Reginald

Petty, it is hard to explain how heavy industry got away with such blatant detrimental environmental impacts.

"I am still not sure myself how the politicians at the time let them get away with this," he said. "None of them were paying taxes in the 40s and none of them are even today to East St. Louis. Therefore, when we

talk about how do we finance things in East St. Louis, how can we without a tax base?"

Despite its bad reputation, East St. Louis has been a hotbed for the arts in the past. Edna Patterson Petty said that she sees art as a way to hope.

"A lot of people don't see it now as a vital thing because we need more business, so for some people art is at the bottom of the ladder, but for me it's at the top because I'm an artist and as a therapist I know how art can make you feel," she said.

Although some may think that what East St. Louis needs is better planning, the fact of the matter is that the city has had a lot of plans. Many, however, think that those plans have been unrealistic because they have not really taken into consideration the nature of the city itself.

"You have to look at the tax base in East St. Louis," said Theising. "When you talk about the educational system, only 10 percent of the funds are made up of local taxes, the rest from the state and federal. So, those plans are kind of idealistic." What the panel agreed on was that East St. Louis has lacked people championing its possibilities.

"We need a group of alums, people from the city here who have become prominent, to fight for what needs to be done," said Reginald Petty. The panel was not entirely pessimistic regarding the future of East St. Louis. When they were asked what could be done to improve the situation, they offered a number of ideas. One idea was to convert some of the urban prairies into farming plots so that people could cultivate their own food.

"Having food and access to fresh food is a critically important component of their health," said Thimsen. Other proposals included developing waterfronts as recre-

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

ational areas, as well as more areas dedicated to the arts, education and cultural resources.

All agree that before another plan comes along the residents of East St. Louis themselves must be consulted as to what they want to see their city become. They agree that bringing the residents into the conversation is essential, including specially targeting groups with experience and ideas as to how to address the arts, education, community recreational activities and the food issue. In other words, convene residents who know their own priorities before developing another plan.

For some of the panelists who are long-life residents of the city, some proposals are so commonsensical that they should be enacted immediately: East St. Louis should ban liquor-by-the-drink, it should completely revamp the police force and it should provide quality housing.

Former Vice President Hubert Humphrey once said, "We are in danger of making our cities places where business goes on but where life, in its real sense, is lost." For many it seems that East St. Louis has lost both its business and its life. But there was no question among our panelists that there is still hope.

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.