

# OPINION



From left, Jason Griffith, Vivian Hodge, and Kevin Cole represent the Lexington Historical Black Neighborhood Association Council. They are sponsoring the Dis & Dat Dance Troupe as one of their projects.

## Lexington Black neighborhoods unite to fight displacement

BY LINDA BLACKFORD  
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Inside the aqua blue walls of the Green Acres Park shelter, three preteen girls practiced their dance routine under the sharp eye of their coach, Mariah Shepard, as she sorted through new sequined costumes.

The Dis + Dat Dance Company is a new project to highlight African American dancing of all kinds, a way to teach the younger generation about their culture and history.

“That’s going to help them with self-confidence, knowledge, and all kinds of things,” Shepard said.

That’s the idea of everything involved with the new Lexington Historic Black Neighborhood Association Council, a group of 10 Black neighborhood associations and community associations across the city. It includes the Georgetown Street Area NA, William Wells Brown CA, Marlboro NA, Green Acres-Breckinridge-Hollow Creek NA, Spiegle Heights NA, Smithtown NA, Pralltown NA, Winburn NA, St. Martin’s Village NA, and Oakwood NA.

The group’s president, Vivian Hodge, said the different associations came together late in 2024 after a series of threats to Black neighborhoods appeared in short succession together: a luxury student apartment

building that threatened to wipe out what little is left of Pralltown, a plan to put a mobile home park next to Lexington’s first Black suburban neighborhood of St. Martin’s Village, and the ongoing issues of displacement and gentrification amidst rising home prices in the city.

“We wanted to make sure we could come together and preserve the presence of these historic Black neighborhoods, uplift them so we can move forward together,” said Hodge, who grew up in the East End.

The group’s vice president, Kevin Cole, who grew up in and now lives in Spiegle Heights, said the threats are so pervasive, and the Black neighborhoods so outnumbered, that the associations felt they had to present a “unified voice.”

“People need to know who we are and what we represent in the history of this city,” Cole said.

Like most American cities, Lexington has a history of structural racism and marginalization, starting with restricted deeds that kept Blacks out of many neighborhoods, to redlining that prevented widespread homeownership and kept many Black neighborhoods poorer.

Urban expansion flattened neighborhoods such as Adamstown, torn down for Memorial Coliseum, and South Hill, destroyed for Rupp Arena. Today, they are open to predation that plague poor neighborhoods, like gentrification and displacement in some neighborhoods, or an overwhelming number of

unregulated sober living homes in others.

There has been some good news lately.

After pushback in Pralltown from its neighborhood association and others, the developer sat down with advocates and their lawyer, Bruce Simpson. The developer reached an agreement with the group on a smaller plan, along with a commitment to give \$3 million for a new nonprofit focused on preserving the few remaining owner-occupied homes in the historically Black neighborhood.

An outpouring of protest from St. Martin’s Village led to the defeat of the mobile homes. Now single-family houses will be built on that land, although a fight over access roads is still brewing.

And the Lexington Urban County Council unanimously voted to establish stricter rules on sober living homes, requiring them to be licensed and certified by the state.

It’s good that both developers and city officials are listening to the needs of Black neighborhoods, said Simpson, so that compromises like the one in Pralltown might be replicated.

“I think this could be applied to African American neighborhoods,” Simpson said. “Lexington clearly has gentrification and displacement issues, particularly in poor neighborhoods. There’s a need for more housing and density, and more care needs to be taken in how it’s done.”

Plans to highlight ‘a rich history and culture’

The legal needs of Black

neighborhoods are crucial. But the new council also wants to focus on the historical and cultural importance of folks who helped build Lexington, but were often left out of its history.

Hence, the new dance team, which will have its first showcase at the Black and Williams Cultural Center on March 14.

They’re exploring ways to fundraise. They want to help get more kids into trades, so there are more folks out there to help with routine maintenance. They want to set up financial literacy classes for people to help them better understand how to hang on to their houses. And they want to explore a directory of Black-owned businesses to help support locally owned establishments.

“We want to build our own economy within these neighborhoods,” Hodge said, hearkening back to the days when Deweese Street was the center of the Black population here. “That way we don’t have to depend on others.”

In two weeks, the council will hold a meet and greet with all the primary election candidates, so the council members get to know their politicians and vice versa.

All in all, the new council hopes to become a force on all fronts — political, cultural and financial.

“I feel like a lot of these neighborhoods were written off,” Hodge said. “We’re trying to make sure Lexington knows we have a rich history and culture, that we’re just as valuable as any other neighborhood.”

## Kentuckians deserve a say in whether they get fluoride in local water

BY BRITTANY ELAM



I’m a lifelong Kentuckian who has lived in both rural and urban Kentucky. I have seen how access to dental care can be extremely difficult regardless of where you call home.

Early on, my mother drove more than 40 minutes from Washington County to Boyle County to take me to dental appointments. If it weren’t for Medicaid, I would have had no oral healthcare growing up. I watched both of my parents, both who worked low wage jobs, lose their teeth. For them, not only was it difficult to find a dentist, but it was impossible to afford the amount of dental work needed to sustain their teeth after years of not having access to dental care. At age 30, my mother learned that she had periodontal disease. This was devastating due to the progression that had gone unchecked as a result of being uninsured and unable to pay out of pocket for care.

While I am writing today in my professional role, I’m also writing as a Kentuckian whose life has been shaped by what it means to have, or not to have, access to oral healthcare.

House Bill 103 and Senate Bill 55 under consideration in the Kentucky legislature, would allow local water districts to decide whether to continue fluoridating public drinking water that often serves multiple Kentucky counties and even some out-of-state counties. HB 103 and SB 55 push the decision to the local level, which means community voices and local input must be built into the process, too.

At Kentucky Voices for Health, we visit with communities statewide and we listen — and what we hear, over and over, is that Kentucky families cannot get the dental care that they need. That gap makes every tool we have to fight tooth decay that much more critical.

Fluoride is one of those tools, and for over half a century, has been beneficial in helping prevent decay through community water fluoridation. Oral health providers agree that prevention is the foundation for healthy teeth, and fluoride is the cornerstone of that foundation. Thankfully, Kentucky’s water systems are carefully monitored and controlled at the lowest and safest effective levels.

When you hear about “local mandates,” it’s important to compare the

cost of care to the cost of fluoridating our drinking water. The cost to prevent decay (which in turn helps prevent chronic diseases related to tooth decay, including some cancers) is minimal — we’re looking at less than a dollar per person per year.

The projected cost of treating additional decay is far greater. State estimates for increased Medicaid cost projections alone indicate for every 10% of Kentuckians who lose access to fluoridated water, the cost of treating the increased decay in kids alone would be nearly \$20 million per year. This does not include costs within Medicaid, and commercial insurance networks, or, the additional uncompensated care and emergency room burdens. I think we need to be honest with ourselves about our current capacity. Even if we wanted to “treat our way out” of more decay, we don’t have enough dentists and dental professionals to do so, especially in rural areas. Building a stronger workforce takes time, intention, and in recent years, only minimal progress has been made to grow Kentucky’s oral health workforce pipeline. While we invest in our workforce, we cannot afford to strip away preventive measures that are helping us hold the line.

What’s more is that the federal EPA recently announced what it calls a “gold standard” scientific review of fluoride exposure and health effects. This review could help us more academically inform future protective recommendations and standards. You don’t build a house from the rooftop down, so we need to give the process time.

As reports of findings and recommendations are released, Kentuckians deserve a chance to be heard. If HB 103 or SB 55 advance, there must be a clear process in place that guarantees a body elected by its community to provide public notice, and allow time for public comment and participation, so the community has a true say in the decisions that affect their health. That should be Kentucky’s “gold standard” review.

Kentucky families are already struggling with a number of economic issues, including accessible dental care. This is not the moment to leave them voiceless in the decisions for their community’s water fluoridation, one of the very few resources that reaches everyone equally. Now is the time for Kentuckians to urge our state legislators to protect our families with what we know works.

Brittany Elam is a policy specialist with Kentucky Voices for Health.

## Our Constitution is too important for games of political chicken

BY REP. ANNE GAY  
DONWORTH

We can’t play chicken with the Constitution.

Last month, the Commonwealth of Kentucky received a visit from Florida Governor Ron DeSantis promoting House Con-

current Resolution 45 (HCR 45) calling for a Convention of the States under Article V of the United States Constitution.

Supporters of the resolution are asking for an amendment to the U.S. Constitution requiring the federal government to

pass a balanced budget — laudable, in theory, except that 11 Nobel-Prize winning economists agree that it isn’t solid fiscal policy.

Proponents argue that the U.S. is spending too much of its budget paying interest on the constantly growing national debt.

They are calling for states to formally request a constitutional amendment by calling a Convention of the States under Article V of the Constitution. They claim states could require delegates to only address the single issue for which the Convention was called.

Here’s the fundamental problem: Article V doesn’t specify how a Convention of the States works. In fact, it says that, once called, it “shall be valid to all intents and purposes.” Simply put, that means that once a Convention of the States is opened, there is no way to control the process.

With no clarification in Article V about how convention delegates would be selected, legislative supermajorities could select delegates who want

to do away with certain amendments — perhaps reverting back to 3/5 of a person? Or maybe repealing women’s right to vote? Or the First Amendment guaranteeing our right to free speech, press, assembly, or religion?

It could go even further than that. The last time that our country held a Convention of States was in 1787. Delegates gathered in Philadelphia to amend the federal govern-

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