

**Testimony of the New Jersey Regional Coalition**  
**To the Assembly Housing and Local Government Committee**  
**On the subject of fair housing and opportunity**

**March 4, 2010**

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**Rev. Buffalo**

Good afternoon, I want to first thank Chairman Green on behalf of myself, and my colleagues here for the opportunity to address this committee.

I am R. Lenton Buffalo Jr., I am the pastor of the Union Baptist Church of Elizabeth; a resident of Hillside, NJ, and President of the New Jersey Regional Coalition, a state-wide, faith-based organization that fought alongside former Speaker Roberts and Chairman Green in 2008 to abolish the use of Regional Contribution Agreements or RCAs.

For 25 years, the forces of retreatism refused to acknowledge the moral imperative for change. For a quarter century, our state was economically paralyzed and morally compromised by a bizarre Faustian bargain that allowed New Jersey's wealthiest towns to pay cash strapped communities to take their affordable housing.

This loophole in our fair housing laws contributed in no small way to New Jersey being the most economically segregated state in the union.

A recent New York Times story declared the “Wealth Gap for Schools in New Jersey the Highest” in the nation. “Nearly one in five public schools has almost no poor students, the highest percentage of any state, according to a new report, by the Fordham Institute - a conservative think tank.”

At hearings before this committee in 2008, one expert after another linked RCAs to our national shame of racial and economic segregation and our economic stagnation – including Professor Doug Massey of Princeton, co-author of “American Apartheid,” Professor Camille Charles of University of Pennsylvania, Professor Myron Orfield, University of Minnesota. David Rusk, respected author and urban policy expert, showed us how not a single RCA receiving town had *ever* reduced its poverty rate. In fact, all increased poverty during their RCA receiving years. Even the Rev. C.T. Vivian, a confidant of Martin Luther King Jr. and officer of the SCLC, called RCAs a throwback to “Jim Crow, saying “[it was] not just a loophole in the law, [but] a loophole in the soul of New Jersey.”

Thanks to Chairman Green and Former Speaker Roberts, that hole in our soul has been repaired. The last thing we need is to put ourselves back in the moral straight jacket of RCAs or any system where the state’s richest communities toss RCA funds to economically-beleaguered city mayors like defective life jackets to drowning men and women.

I would like to turn this over now to my two colleagues, Rev. Eric Wallace from our Lower Delaware District, and Rev. Charles Stephens from NJRC’s Capital District, who will address other aspects of this issue.

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**Rev. Wallace**

Good Afternoon ladies and gentlemen. My name is Eric Wallace, Pastor of New Life Cathedral in Burlington City N.J., South Jersey district leader for Abundant Harvest of Churches (Bishop David Evans, president), and a member of the New Jersey Regional Coalition.

What brings me here is my belief that all New Jersey residents have the right to affordable and fair housing that ensures New Jersey becomes the melting pot that this state was meant to be and not the mixing pot that it has been, where we continue to segregate on so many different levels.

It is well established that Regional Contribution Agreements have perpetuated and promoted segregation. So we must work to undo the harm that they did and vow never to return to such an immoral, destructive, and demeaning policy.

Rather than talking of how we replace or restore RCA money for urban areas, we need to fight together at the state *and* federal level for real investments in our distressed communities across the state -- not for "blood money" as former Speaker Roberts described RCAs -- but for *good* money to invest in infrastructure, roads, schools, transit, energy, and communication technology. Investments that create *real* jobs, revitalize our economy, restore our tax base and create opportunity.

RCAs have denied opportunity and hurt our economy. We believe if you are good enough to work in a town, you are good enough to live there. RCAs have denied hundreds of workers the right to live and send their kids to school in job-rich suburbs where they work, while leaving thousands of families trapped in poor neighborhoods where the jobs have vanished -- like so many of the struggling towns in Burlington County, from Burlington to Beverly to Palmyra, that have absorbed the region's poor because towns Mount Laurel, Moorestown, and Evesham have fought so hard to keep them out.

Our President, Rev. Buffalo, has been traveling to Washington, meeting with officials from the White House Office of Urban Policy, HUD, and other agencies to support significant investments in job creation and financial relief for our struggling towns and cities. We urge all of you to work with us to bring real investments and jobs back to New Jersey, while making our state and our housing policies more equitable and fairer for all families and communities – and that means never bringing RCAs or anything like them back to our state.

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**Rev. Stephens**

Good afternoon. My name is Charles Stephens; I'm the pastor of the Unitarian Universalist Church at Washington Crossing in Titusville, part of Hopewell Township. I am member of the New Jersey Regional Coalition.

We appreciate the sincere desire by some to make our affordable housing system fairer while making our state more prosperous - we applaud them. We have issues with how housing obligations are applied and allocated. More consideration should be given to our diverse suburbs such as those in Essex County, like Montclair or West Orange, here in Mercer, like Ewing and Hamilton, or places like Winslow and Gloucester Township in Camden County.

Much more needs to be done to de-concentrate poverty in our poorest cities by promoting redevelopment and regional opportunity.

The biggest problem is that some of our wealthiest towns refuse to do their share – towns in Bergen like Upper Saddle River, Ramsey and Allendale remain unwelcoming to African Americans, Hispanics, and low-income families; or Morris County like Denville, Mountain Lakes, and Mendham that have used RCAs to keep working families out, and Cranbury, a town in Middlesex, that's seen incredible job growth, high incomes, and the county's lowest tax rates, continues to fight to remain racially and economically exclusive.

This is what needs to be fixed. Allowing municipalities like these to self-certify will not fix the problem. Bringing back RCAs will multiply the problem. Whether authority remains with COAH or goes to the State Planning Commission, equal access to fair housing needs to be enforced by the state.

Our gravest concern is the lack of a fair process. It seems this debate, until now, has been dominated by a handful of wealthy towns, represented by the League of Municipalities' staff who worked tirelessly to defeat Joe Roberts' housing bill, and now want to undo his legacy -- and yours Mr. Chairman.

We don't want to slow down reform, but the League and commercial developers have had their say. We call on this committee to broaden the conversation and to slow it down, so we can include and consider all constituencies and stakeholders that need to be involved -- including experts in land use, fair housing, the religious community, labor, the home builders, and responsible mayors who are willing to participate in an equitable process that will correct the problems with our fair housing bureaucracy, not make it worse. Ramming through a bad bill will trigger another decade of legal fights, more segregation and economic stagnation.