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BISCO concerns will be shared with candidates

By Katina A. Gaudet
South Lafourche Bureau

Members of local church congregations are taking their concerns about the area to the state's next governor.

The Bayou Interfaith Shared Community Organizing, an interfaith organization whose members say they are a voice for low- to moderate-income people, is working to get its platform heard by gubernatorial candidates.

"It addresses major issues in the state that we have seen in our communities," said Sharon Gauthé, director of BISCO, of the group's platform.

The aim is to present the platform - which centers on education, drug abuse, health care, housing, the economy, the environment and juvenile justice - at a gubernatorial forum that the Pacific Institute for Community Organization and the statewide Louisiana Interfaith Together, will conduct.

The forum is set for 7 p.m. Nov. 11 at the Catholic Life Center in Baton Rouge.

"People are concerned that there is no real opportunity in Louisiana, that our education system is failing our children," the forum announcement says. "Jobs are scarce and don't pay well. The environment is unhealthy for all of us, especially children. Drug addiction is prevalent, but affordable treatment is hard, if not impossible to come by. Health care is out of the reach of many, especially preventive health care. Housing concerns range from neglect by landlords to lack of affordable low income housing, to blighted neighborhoods. And our juvenile justice system is not addressing the needs of our most troubled youth."

The platform the groups are advocating is the result of conversations throughout the state with families from a faith perspective, group leaders say.

Barbara C. Johnson, a BISCO leader and member of St. Luke's Evangelist Catholic Church in Thibodaux, was among those who discussed the issues and helped finalize the platform.

She said the discussions, which included other local residents in meetings, focused on the most pressing issues, the ones people from different areas of Louisiana seemed to discuss time and again.

"These seemed to be the ones people were most concerned with," said Johnson.

BISCO is working with four other faith-based projects in the state, and those groups represent nearly a dozen cities and more than 100 churches of 12 denominations and 100,000 families.

The forum will not be a debate, nor will it result in an endorsement, group leaders say.

It's an opportunity for the groups to present their platform and inquire of the candidates their plans.

To date, neither Kathleen Blanco nor Bobby Jindal has confirmed an attendance at the forum, notice of which was sent to the campaigns as early as July, leaders say.

Should they not attend, leaders say they will continue with the forum and the platform will be delivered to both camps.

For now, the groups say they are trying to get the platform to the area's voters.

The Rev. Lloyd Wallace, a BISCO leader and pastor emeritus of Mount Zion Baptist Church in Thibodaux, said BISCO leaders will be out in force during the upcoming Sunday services before the runoff election, passing out materials to congregation members and others.

Those leading the effort hope to have 35,000 residents throughout the state supporting the platform. "We don't want people to just tuck it into their pocketbooks," said Wallace of the platforms group leaders will be handing out.

Local leaders say their motivation is simple.

"We're all about one thing, positive change," said Burnell Tolbert, a member of BISCO and of Mt. Zion. "We're trying to make sure there's a better life for all, no matter the age, the color, the creed - everybody."

The statewide platform can be viewed at www.spcoach.com/picolift.

Those who support the platform can print it, sign it and fax it to Gauthe at 446-5364.

Katina A. Gaudet can be reached at 693-6319 or by e-mail at katina.gaudet@dailycomet.com.
