

Public forum tomorrow on diversity, gang issues in Poconos

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Racism is not new to the Poconos, although some deny its existence here today.

In 1955, Bob Hillman's family attempted to buy a house on North Courtland Street in East Stroudsburg. People from miles around signed a petition to prevent a black family from buying a house there, saying their presence would lower property values and bring in more black families.

Hillman, chairperson of the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, Monroe County Advisory Council, drives past the house every day and is reminded of the era when his was the only black family in the area. Since then, the flow of diversity in Monroe County has not always been met with open arms.

An "us versus them" or "local folks versus city folks" rivalry pervades the community. Around these parts, city is code for diversity. Diversity is code for color. And sometimes, color is code for crime, increasingly committed by gang members.

A free public forum addressing the relationship between discrimination and gangs in Pike County will be presented Saturday at the Pocono Environmental Educational Center in Dingmans Ferry.

"We picked the Pike county area because they are having more problems than Monroe. They are going through what we were, 10 years ago, an influx of diversity coming in," Hillman said.

The problems associated with an increasing population have been mentioned before.

Parents buy a home in the Poconos, bring kids out of the city and commuting is more grueling than they expected.

"Parents give the kids \$200 and a cell phone, and off parent goes for the week. The kids are unsupervised and have a good chunk of change in their pocket. Gangs are growing because of the drug traffic here," Hillman said.

Commuting parents are hard to reach and short on free time. "If you commute, you are not going to programs like this forum, and you are the ones that need to be there. All you want to do on the weekend is take care of your house, do laundry and pay the bills," Hillman, a featured speaker, said.

Other speakers include Michael Leonard Sr., criminal justice consultant and gang expert; Dr. Robert Venezia, vice-chair of the Tri-state Unity Coalition; Letitia Lladoc,

a multicultural studies instructor at Gratz College; and Martin Kearney from the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission.

IF YOU GO

What: Public forum on discrimination and gang activity in Pike County

Cost: Free

When: Saturday, 10 a.m.-2 p.m.

Where: Pocono Environmental Education Center (PEEC), Route 209 north of Bushkill

For more information, call Tri-state Unity Coalition (570) 686-5555