



Written by [James Murphy](#) on March 24, 2021

Evanston, Illinois, Approves Local Plan for Reparations for Black Citizens – But Is It Really Reparations?

On March 22, the City Council of Evanston, Illinois, approved the first expenditures of the city’s municipal reparations fund, which was established in 2019. The program is intended to repair historical harm caused by “discriminatory housing policies and practices and inaction on the city’s part.”

The [City Council](#) voted 8-1 to initiate the [Local Reparations Restorative Housing Program](#). The initial budget for the new program is \$400,000.

The program is reportedly the first of its kind in the United States and is seen by supporters as a possible template for a national reparations program. The first \$10 million of the overall program will be financed through a 3 percent sales tax on recreational marijuana and some private donations.



Graphic: Bplanet/iStock/Getty Images Plus

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Initially, reparations will be paid to eligible black residents of the city in the form of grants for down payments for the purchase of homes or for repairs on homes in the city. The program will pay eligible recipients up to \$25,000 for down payments, home repairs or to pay down mortgage principal, interest, or late penalties on a property located in the City of Evanston.

In order to qualify for the program, applicants must have “origins in any of the Black racial and ethnic groups of Africa,” according to a memo from interim assistant city manager. In addition, applicants must have been a black resident of Evanston between the years 1919-1969 or a direct descendant of that person.

According to a draft of the resolution: “The Restorative Housing Program (The Program), the first program of the Evanston Local Reparations Fund, acknowledges the harm cause to Black/African-American Evanston residents due to discriminatory housing policies and practices and inaction on the city’s part.”

Alderman Robin Rue Simmons, the architect of the program, said that the new housing program is only a start on the proposed reparations.

“It is, alone, not enough,” Simmons said. “We all know that the road to repair and justice in the Black community is going to be a generation of work. It’s going to be many programs and initiatives, and more funding.”

Rue Simmons cited significant gaps between white households and black households in Evanston when



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she first proposed the program back in 2019.

“We have a large and unfortunate gap in wealth, opportunity, education, even life-expectancy,” Rue Simmons told NPR. “The fact that we have a \$46,000 gap between census tract 8092, which is the historically red-line neighborhood that I live in and was born in, and the average white household led me to pursue a very radical solution to a problem that we have not been able to resolve: reparations.”

But not all agreed that what the City Council was voting for was truly “reparations.”

Resident Meleika Gardner chastised the council for rushing the vote and because the program is referred to as “reparations,” instead of as a housing program.

“People are coming at [those who oppose the program] very hard. Understand, the opposers just do not want this housing program to be called reparations because it is not reparations,” Gardner said. “Why are you rushing? This isn’t about your legacy. This isn’t about career advancement.”

“Don’t call it reparations. Just call it a housing program,” Gardner concluded.

Indeed, the main objection to the program was that, strictly speaking, it is not reparations, at least as many in the black community understand the term.

The lone vote against the program came from Alderman Cicely Fleming, who echoed the point that the program wasn’t really reparations. “What we have before us tonight, I would counter, is a housing program with the title reparations,” Fleming said in a [statement](#).

“As ‘reparations in name only,’ there is no autonomy for the community harmed. Instead of cash payments, which respect the humanity and self-determination of Black people and allow them to decide what’s best for themselves, this housing program is restrictive and only allows limited participation.”

Apparently no one on the City Council publicly took the position that providing reparations is wrong since all of the former slaves, and all of the former slave owners, have long since passed away, and that government should not be taking from some to give to others in the name of fighting racial injustice.

Other municipalities such as Amherst, Mass., [Asheville, N.C.](#), and Iowa City, Iowa, are considering local reparations programs of their own. And nationally, the House of Representatives is considering [H.R. 40](#), a bill that would create a “commission to study and consider a national apology and proposal for reparations for the institution of slavery.”

Meanwhile, in Evanston, Illinois, the City Council and the citizens can’t even agree that what is being called reparations is truly reparations.



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