

# PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH IN THE EMMA COMMUNITY:

## A REPORT ON RESEARCH FINDINGS AND PLANS FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

**COMMUNITY  
OWNERSHIP  
PODER**

**EMMA**

## Acknowledgements and Authors

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The work outlined in this report was inspired by previous community development planning efforts in the Shiloh community and the Burton Street community, two historically African American communities in Asheville. We carefully read the neighborhood plans that these communities developed. We also asked the grassroots leaders involved in these plans for advice based on their experiences. We could never have done the work outlined below without their inspiration and advice.

Authors. This report has multiple authors. We list them below, and outline their contributions.

The PODER EMMA / Emma Community Ownership Project research team. These are the researchers who conducted the participatory action research outlined in this report. This group also facilitated the Community Analysis Workshop, where community members set goals for collection action based on the research. Basically, this is the group that did all of the on-the-ground work described below. The research team was made up of the following people:

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Cenzontle Language Justice Worker Owned Cooperative. Cenzontle provided interpretation and translation services for the creation of this research process and final report.

## Executive Summary

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This report outlines a participatory, community-driven research, planning, and development effort in the Emma community of Asheville, North Carolina. Emma is a diverse, low-wealth neighborhood, with many large mobile home communities. It is generally a safe, green, clean, pleasant community, a good place to raise a family. There is a long history of grassroots organizing and community building in Emma; people have been coming together for years around many issues, including their children's education, their rights as immigrants, the creation of neighborhood infrastructure such as sidewalks, systems of solidarity economy and efforts to prevent gentrification from displacing residents from their homes.

In early 2018, PODER EMMA / Emma Community Ownership Project, a grassroots group, began a research project to better understand community members' thoughts and feelings around gentrification and displacement. We wanted to talk particularly with people living in mobile home communities, for several reasons: (1) many people in Emma own the trailer that they live in, but not the land on which their trailer sits – and this can result in displacement if the landowner decides to sell; (2) mobile homes are often perceived as temporary, disposable, undignified housing; and (3) for the reasons above, mobile home communities are where the threat of displacement is highest.

To better understand gentrification and displacement in Emma, we formed a core research team of 12 community members. We are not formally-trained researchers; rather, we are neighbors, moms and dads, workers and small business owners. We sought training, support, and coaching from Isabel Vinent Gramany and Reca Fernandez, of Popular Education Consultants (PECI). Members of our community had worked with Peci before; we already had a store of mutual respect and trust from which we could start our work.

PECI taught us how to do research and with their support we designed and developed our own rigorous, sound research. In addition to teaching us technical research skills, Peci taught us about popular education, participatory action research, and participatory development:

- Popular education – learning from our experiences, education for social change;
- Participatory action research – we do the research, and it leads to collective action;
- Participatory development – change that is done by us, not to, for, or even with us.

With Peci's help, we conducted our own research study on our community's perspectives on gentrification and displacement. We developed a survey, then went door-to-door and had conversations with 166 people in our community. We entered the data into computers, then analyzed it using sound, rigorous, academic methods. The research team summarized the findings from our research, and then – since this is action-focused research – we presented our findings back to the community. We invited folks to form groups to develop goals and strategies related to our research findings. We are currently working to realize these goals.

Some of the key findings from our survey research are outlined below:

- People move to Emma for convenience, affordability, and because of family ties.
- People stay in Emma for these same reasons: convenience, affordability, family.
- The things that make Emma special are its location, its diversity, and its sense of community.
- Benefits of living in a mobile home include affordability, location, and community.
- Challenges include gentrification, housing quality, and the lack of voice that tenants in mobile home parks have in decisions made by mobile home park owners.
- People fear being displaced from mobile homes, due to higher rent and gentrification.
- Potential community improvements relate to maintenance, recreation, and safety.
- Creating mechanisms to facilitate community ownership is critical to Emma's future.

We presented the findings from our survey to approximately 65 Emma residents in a Community Analysis Meeting. We divided people into small groups focusing on four issues that emerged from our data. We facilitated popular education sessions where community members shared their experiences and wisdom around these issues, thus deepening the analysis from the survey.

The notes from the dialogues at the Community Workshop are summarized below:

## HOUSING AND DISPLACEMENT

### Problems analyzed:

Investors and developers have been targeting mobile home parks to purchase, bulldoze and redevelop for higher income housing, displacing many low income families in Buncombe County. This displacement impacts both on a personal and societal level. This includes emotional damage, loss of friends and relationships which increases isolation, losing one's vision and hope for life, as well as weakening the local economy and creating economic uncertainty.

### Solutions identified:

- Housing cooperatives
- Real estate cooperatives
- Resident owned mobile home communities

- Neighborhood loan funds
- Negotiation with owners for right of first refusal (offering to sell to residents before putting property on the market)
- Policy change and advocacy to prevent loss of mobile home parks

## LANDOWNERS AND LANDLESS PEOPLE

### Problems analyzed:

Renting land and homes puts us at a big disadvantage economically. Few people own a large percentage of the land in our community, and renters are dependent on owners for stability. In many cases, the landowners depend on tenants for their income, but often treat tenants as disposable. Rents and home prices are rapidly rising, and land and houses sell quickly to people and companies with access, knowledge and capital. This means that buying land is extremely difficult for our community members, and the few loans that we can access have very high interest rates and many barriers to access.

### Solutions identified:

- Resident councils
- Neighborhood loan funds
- Housing cooperatives and resident owned communities
- Real Estate Cooperatives
- Negotiation for right of first refusal
- Worker owned mobile home repair cooperative

## COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE AND PARK

### Problems analyzed:

There aren't any public places to gather in Emma, such as libraries, recreational centers or parks. The community is hesitant to develop such projects because it might lure in higher income people and increase gentrification and displacement. The neighborhood is also lacking important infrastructure including sidewalks, crosswalks, improved bus stops and public transportation, traffic lights, speed bumps, sewage, trash and recycling service, and public lighting.

### Solutions identified:

- Resident led development plans for a community

park and public spaces in Emma, must be done in a way that does not accelerate gentrification of the neighborhood.

- Redevelopment of vacant properties or lots into recreational assets for Emma such as soccer fields, kids' play areas, youth recreational center, gardens and a commercial kitchen.
- Development of more community based cultural assets in Emma that reflect the culture and tell the history of the neighborhood.
- Creation of more resident owned housing before we advocate for major infrastructure improvements.

## HOSTILITY AND SAFETY

### Problems analyzed:

Mobile homes are highly vulnerable to breaking and entering, and many residents of the Emma community do not have trusting relationships with local law enforcement and their response to frequent breaking and entering. Also, tenants are subject to ever changing rules and policies instated by some mobile home park owners. Additionally, Emma is a diverse community and sometimes there are tensions between different races and ethnic groups, as well language barriers to communication between neighbors.

### Solutions identified:

- Lack of safety due to frequent breaking and entering can be addressed through improving the quality of mobile home doors and windows, as well as through increased dialogue between neighbors, mobile home park owners and law enforcement.
- Lack of safety related to law enforcement collaboration and ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) can be addressed through voting, advocacy and organizing.
- Land owner-landlord-renter relationships and communication can be improved through dialogue and the creation of a mobile home residents council.
- Neighborhood events, projects and initiatives that create spaces with interpretation to build stronger relationships between neighbors.

It was very affirming and exciting to see so much overlap and patterns between the solutions identified by the working groups during the Community Analysis Workshop. After the workshop, PODER Emma Community Ownership has begun working to refine

these ideas into more concrete goals and strategies, which we are very excited to share!

## GOALS

- **Goal 1:** Form a neighborhood based loan fund to support cooperatives and community ownership
- **Goal 2:** Create a Cooperative Network to create systems of technical and financial support, mutual support between members, and toolkits and resources
- **Goal 3:** Study the feasibility of the creation of a real estate cooperative to protect and develop properties in the best interest of neighborhood residents.
- **Goal 4:** Preserve and share the unique history and character of the Emma Community
- **Goal 5:** Seek partnerships, collaborations, pilot programs and the creation of a mobile home repair cooperative to improve quality of mobile homes and reduce vulnerability to breaking and entering.
- **Goal 6:** Share the findings, goals and strategies in this report with organizations, agencies, local government, investors and developers so that decisions about our community are not made without our community's perspective.
- **Goal 7:** The creation of an Emma Residents Council to carry out the vision and work so lovingly created by our neighborhood, including advocacy, civic engagement and policy creation to prevent the loss of mobile home parks, the creation of neighborhood infrastructure and assets, and building relationships between neighbors, small business owners and landlords in the Emma community.

## Introduction

Something special happened recently in the Emma community, a diverse, low-wealth, but gentrifying neighborhood in Asheville, North Carolina. Our community began to envision and define its future. With support from a couple of committed and knowledgeable outsiders, community members conducted sophisticated, PhD-level research on issues that we defined. Our research used methodologies that are sound enough to survive peer review in an academic journal. The researchers in this case were not academics with PhDs or their graduate students; rather, the researchers were us - local people and neighbors.

Further, the research we conducted yielded knowledge, but not knowledge for knowledge's sake. We sought knowledge that could lead to collective action for community transformation and social change. Once we had collected data, we presented our analysis of the data to community members. Neighborhood residents then used the findings from the research to create plans to improve, even transform, our community. This report tells the story of how this happened.

We wrote this report to share what we did and what we learned. We hope to communicate to institutions and their representatives (e.g., government agencies, nonprofit organizations, funders, churches, schools) who work with, make decisions about and impact our community. But we also hope to communicate what we did and what we learned with other communities. We think what we did is replicable, so here we lay out what we did with as much clarity as we can.

Background for our current work: Years of community organizing. We began the work outlined in this report by organizing ourselves. We had been organizing ourselves as a community for many years, around issues like cultural afterschool programming for our children, broader school reform efforts, sidewalks for our streets, ICE raids and police checkpoints, and grassroots economic development efforts such as cooperatively owned mobile home

communities and worker owned businesses. These prior efforts, this rich history of cooperation, is important. Well before we started our research, we had a strong, united neighborhood. Our community was made up of dense, rich webs of mutual trust and respect among neighbors.

A few of the community organizing efforts outlined above have been crucial for forming the roots of the work outlined in this report. First, members of our community have been deeply involved in immigrants' rights organizing. Many immigrant families have been living in the Emma community for the past 15-20 years. Previous community organizing efforts were not focused on gentrification and displacement, but driver's license checkpoints. In 2006, a new NC law made it impossible for undocumented immigrants to have a NC driver's license. This meant that the frequent Buncombe County Sheriff, Asheville Police and Highway Patrol checkpoints in the Emma community were resulting in heavy fines and even deportations for neighborhood residents. These checkpoints also impacted low income residents and people of color in Emma that often were targeted for minor infractions, such as expired inspections and faulty headlights, resulting in fines that low income families could not afford to pay. Emma residents worked with several organizations, including the Center for

Participatory Change (CPC), Compañeros Inmigrantes de las Montañas en Acción (CIMA), Nuestro Centro, and area churches to set up a monitoring and text alert system to protect ourselves and our neighbors from the checkpoints and the danger they represented to our neighborhood. Eventually, due to our collective efforts, we were able to bring the checkpoints down from several each week to one every couple of months.

Another important organizing effort in Emma was around getting sidewalks on a busy road near Emma Elementary School, so that our children could walk safely to and from school. The Emma Community worked with Children First, the Emma Family Resource Center, and the Center for Participatory Change as we advocated with Buncombe County Government for sidewalks in our community. After much effort, the community was successful. Community improvement efforts such as sidewalks are important in showing tangible community change; also, working side-by-side to bring sidewalks to Emma was another way to build up stores of mutual trust in our community.

A more recent organizing effort in our community has been Nuestras Escuelas, Our Schools. This multi-pronged parent-organizing effort, in partnership with Nuestro Centro and the Center for Participatory Change, aimed to address years of practices and policies by local schools, particularly our high school, that resulted in immigrant families and families of color feeling unwelcome. An important recent event for us was when a civics class at the high school worked with issues in the 2016 presidential campaign, and anti-immigrant hate speech was posted on the school's hallways. Throughout all of our schools-focused organizing effort, parents have come together to press for more ways to be involved in their children's education. We worked successfully to change a school system policy that required a social security number for volunteering in the schools. We worked in many ways to become more actively involved in the schools, focusing on issues such as increased parent volunteer opportunities and increased interpretation at school events. Our community continues this work today.

These organizing efforts, as well as many others that live in the hearts and memories of our neighborhood and that we hope to continue documenting, are the roots of the work outlined in this report. Through working on these issues, we have built webs of mutual trust and support. Further, we realized that when we organize, we can win. We can create a system to alert people about police checkpoints (and ICE raids). We can bring sidewalks and pedestrian safety to our neighborhood. We can bring about changes in school policies and practices to make them more equitable. We learned that anything is possible, if we work together. Through all of this work, Emma residents have developed a practice of showing up together. We realized that when we are engaged, we can create something different and better. To paraphrase Arundhati Roy, "Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, we can hear her breathing."

One more thing we have realized: it is time for our community organizing work to become broader and more inclusive. Many community organizing efforts over the last decade in Emma have focused on the daily realities that many of our immigrant families face. This is understandable, because this is our reality; many of us are immigrants or are of mixed immigration status families, and we face entrenched systemic injustices. We realize, though, that a focus on immigrant realities is too narrow a focus for preventing displacement across our community. To address gentrification and prevent displacement, we have to involve and include black, immigrant and white residents in our community. Building deep relationships and effective collective action across language, culture, race, and ethnicity is a major goal of our work as we move forward.

The work in this report: Participatory action research and planning. All of these community organizing efforts helped plant the seeds for the work outlined in this report. For the research and planning effort described in this report, though, we tried to bring all of this together, really for the first time.

We began to organize this evolving work through a new community organization, PODER EMMA Community Ownership Project (PODER/ECOP). We began as a collective of neighbors, all of whom had a general vision of addressing increasingly worrisome issues of gentrification and displacement in our community. It is worth noting that even in our earliest meetings, PODER/ECOP had access to resources such as childcare, food, and interpretation thanks to financial support from a Tipping Points Grant and then an Isaac Coleman Economic Community Investment grant from Buncombe County Government. This support has been crucial to our growth and development. PODER/ECOP has also been tremendously fortunate to receive fiscal sponsorship from Compañeros Inmigrantes de las Montañas en Acción (CIMA) in order to be able to access these resources.

We started the work outlined in this report by studying what some nearby communities in Asheville had done.



Grassroots groups in two historically African American communities, the Shiloh Community Association and the Burton Street Community Association, had worked with government and nonprofit agencies to develop neighborhood plans for their communities. We read their plans carefully and learned a lot from what they had done. We called and visited grassroots leaders and asked for their advice. The work outlined in this report was deeply inspired by the work done in the Shiloh and Burton Street communities, and we are grateful for their brilliant work and dedication.

In the Emma community we wanted to take collective action around gentrification and displacement. We wanted to do something about it, but we didn't want to move forward until we better understood the broader community's views, concerns, analyses, hopes, dreams, and visions. We were particularly interested to hear what folks, like ourselves, who live in mobile home communities were thinking, as the people who are most threatened by displacement in our neighborhood— and because we have many large mobile home communities in Emma. Before we tried to organize folks in our community to take collective action, we wanted more information about what community members were thinking, feeling, and experiencing. That's why we did this research.

Before this, most of us never thought of ourselves as researchers. We're moms and dads, aunts and uncles, neighbors and acquaintances, workers and small business owners. But we love Emma, despite its struggles, and we want to stay here. We don't want to be displaced; we don't want to have to move out, further from our jobs, our extended families and our safety and resource networks. We needed to know what others in our community thought, and to understand our shared realities, struggles and visions, so we learned how to do research.

We had some help. Some people in our community had worked in other settings with Reca Fernandez and Isabel Vinent Gramany, who run a consulting firm called Popular Education Consultants, Inc. (PECI). Isabel and Reca are both from Central America (Honduras and El Salvador, respectively), and both of them have PhDs in adult education; they are national and international experts in popular education and participatory action research. They have done a lot of work helping communities in Central America do participatory action research. They had also helped local western NC groups that some of us had worked with learn more about popular education, analyze immigrants' rights issues across our county, and make plans for our organizations using popular education approaches. We knew each other already; we already had a bank of mutual trust and respect to work from. They had never coached a US community through a community led participatory action research process (the approach is less common in the US than it is in the Global South), but they were interested in working with us. We needed sophisticated, technical, solid, sound research skills – but at a grassroots level. We knew they were the people who could train and coach us.

PECI trained us to be researchers. It didn't happen overnight, and it wasn't easy. They trained us in the philosophy, theory, and methods of participatory action research; they gave us some concrete examples; and they led us through a process where we designed our own research and practiced playing the roles of researchers. We then designed a survey for our community, went door-to-door and asked our questions to our neighbors, then analyzed the data that we collected. When we analyzed our data, particularly the open-ended questions on our survey, we needed PECI's help again. They came and provided a training on how to analyze data in the form of open-ended comments, then they coached us as we went through the process of analyzing our data. Once we had our data analyzed, we presented it back to the community at a half-day community workshop. Folks in the community responded to the data that we had collected, then we invited people to form groups to work further on various ideas for collective action that emerged from the research and from the community workshop. That's where we are now: several groups are moving forward with a set of action steps that emerged from our research. These groups are using our research findings to engage in collective action that aims to transform our community. We provide more detail on what we did, and what we are doing now, in the rest of this report.

## Neighborhood Characteristics and History

### Characteristics of the Emma community

The Emma community is located in Buncombe County, NC. According to the 2016 Census, it has a population of 6,550 people, who live in 2,707 households. 73% of Emma's population earn less than \$50,000 a year. 37% of the

homes in our community are mobile homes. 48% of owner-occupied housing is valued at less than \$100,000. 5% of owner-occupied housing is valued at over \$300,000. The Emma community has an area of 4.6 square miles. It has varying population densities, with the highest density in areas where there are apartment complexes or mobile home communities.

As mentioned above, the Emma community has a rich history of community organizing. Grassroots leaders living in Emma have played leadership roles in many efforts for community improvement and social change, including forming community-building spaces, developing cultural afterschool programming for our children, getting sidewalks in our community, forming a bilingual preschool, broader school reform efforts, addressing the impact and trauma of ICE raids and police checkpoints, and various grassroots economic development efforts such as cooperatively owned mobile home communities, worker owned businesses, and several small businesses that serve the neighborhood. Many of us have worked together for years on issues that we feel passionate about. It was not a stretch for us, in terms of social capital, to do the work outlined in this report. We needed the technical skills, but the passion, relationships, and networks of mutual trust were already in place.

### A brief history of the Emma community

This report focuses on our description of the participatory action research process that we engaged in. However, community history is important context for grassroots efforts. In this section of the report, we summarize what we have been able to document and learn about our history. We have provided more detail on Emma's history, if you are interested, in Appendix A. We are also working on the creation of a documentary about the history, realities and vision of the Emma community, which is being filmed by young people in our community and produced by community media. It is important to us to document the history and present realities of our community, as well as our vision for the future. While property developers and investors are working to re-brand and re-define our neighborhood and many neighborhoods around Asheville and Buncombe County for their financial benefit, it becomes increasingly more important to recognize that our neighborhoods already have names, characteristics, and residents that do not need to be replaced, redeveloped or improved for the benefit of others.

The Emma community's early history is tied to the coming of the railroad, which was what brought boom times to the Asheville area in 1890. Indeed, the Emma community is named after Emma Station, a small train station. And Emma Station was named after a woman named Emma Clayton.

It was the railway that initially brought growth to our community, and to Asheville and Buncombe County as a whole. Significantly, it was the unpaid labor of African Americans that brought Asheville the railway. The Western North Carolina railway was largely built with the unpaid labor of enslaved people, then, after the Civil War, with the unpaid labor of African American prisoners, many of whom were unjustly imprisoned due to racist vagrancy laws and the Black Codes.

Further, some of the prominent white families associated with the Emma community's early history were slave owners and deeply involved in the Confederate Army's attempts to maintain the enslavement of black people in the South. As an example, Ephraim Clayton, the father-in-law of Emma Smith Clayton and grandfather of Emma Clayton was a major builder in the Asheville area who converted his factory to armaments production during the Civil War. Thomas Clayton, Emma Smith Clayton's husband and Emma Clayton's father, was a Confederate soldier.

It is important for us to acknowledge that racial violence, oppression, injustices, and inequities are at some of the roots of our community history. Also at the root of our community are examples of powerful leadership, vision and commitment of African American communities and communities of color. A very important person in our community's history is James Vester Miller. James Vester Miller was born to an enslaved mother in Rutherford County. Following Emancipation, James V. Miller moved with his family to Asheville and built a thriving business, Miller and Sons Construction Company. He built many of Asheville's beautiful and prominent brick buildings that are still standing today, including Mt. Zion Baptist Church, St. Matthias Episcopal Church, and the fire and police departments. He also built the post office down in Prichard Park, which has since been torn down. His family home in Emma, known as Out Home, was described as the center of family life and hospitality for all. James Vester Miller also used his land to create Violet Hill Cemetery, an African American cemetery in Emma, which is still owned by the Miller family and people continue to be buried there. Our community-based economic work must be rooted

in and honor this history, and the recognition that wealth accumulation for some has been done for centuries at the expense of others. It also must be rooted in the history of brave, committed families and leaders who have dedicated their lives to their communities.

Another thread through the history of Emma is entrepreneurship and community economic development. Fisher's Floor Covering opened their business in a building that was built by James Vester Miller, as reported to us by family. Walker Tire and Moss Body Shop were the first of the existing Emma businesses to open along N. Louisiana Avenue, followed by Ramsey's Mobile Home Parts Store. This began another important chapter of Emma's history; the creation of mobile home parks in the early 1980s.

There is also a long history of community economics and caring for each other, including the Miller family's tradition of sharing crops and products such as jams, sauerkraut and meat among early Emma residents throughout the early 1900s. At the end of the century, in the 1980s and 1990s the Emma United Methodist Church Women sold crafts and baked goods at their community bazaars. Then, in the early 2000s, Children First started the Emma Bucks program, a community currency that created a modern bartering system. This work all paved the way for the current community work around cooperative development.

There are many aspects of Emma's history that are intriguing and we acknowledge that we are only in the beginning stages of beginning to relearn, share and document our neighborhood history. The Emma documentary crew, made up of young people from the neighborhood, has done community research in the NC Library Room, and found information that was particularly interesting to them as young people. The documentary crew learned about the Emma burglars, who after being found guilty of an attempted robbery of the Emma Post Office and store in 1902, the two men were hanged in front of a crowd of thousands of people. One of the men, Ben Foster, who had been raised in this community, sang the song "Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior," in front of the crowd, and then sang "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand" on the platform before he was hung.

The documentary crew also learned that from 1890 to 1928 Emma was home to an elite school, the Bingham School, which focused on teaching the classics (especially Latin and Greek) to a national and international student population. Emma was also home to a small airfield, Emma Airport. It was more than a rural airfield, though; it hosted large airshows in the 1940s (with barnstormers and daredevils), and it became a local hotspot for drag racing in the 1950s, when airshows faded in popularity.

A more recent chapter of our history is more unsettling and concerning: Emma is home to a hazardous waste site. From 1960 to 2005 we had a Square D plant in Emma. In 1990, it was discovered that the plant had contaminated the groundwater, and wells were poisoned. Square D was forced to connect residents to Asheville City water systems. In 2012, new concerns arose, as Buncombe County Schools made plans to start a high school adjacent to the Square D site. More recent research had showed the harmfulness of vapor intrusion, where vapors from hazardous waste rise into the air and come into buildings. State inspectors tested the site and found that the levels of vapor intrusion were not dangerous, but an independent 2013 report questioned whether the testing was in-depth enough. It's still not clear how much the pollution and contamination from the Square D plant is harming, or has harmed, community residents.

Emma has a history of industrial facilities and jobs, including the Care-Free Windows plant and the National Wiper Alliance, among others. Despite the fact that the jobs were not as high paying as others in the region, the loss of important employment opportunities has had a real impact on the neighborhood.

We provide more detail on some of the stories above in Appendix A. As this overview suggests, the Emma community has a mosaic-like history. We grew with the coming of the railway, which was built with the unpaid labor of African Americans. We have a long history of families that are dedicated to their neighbors' wellbeing. We have become a tight knit mobile home community, where over 11 of languages are spoken by families at our neighborhood elementary school. We are a neighborhood that is fortunate enough to have the treasure of elders whose memories hold the history of our neighborhood. We have hosted barnstormers and drag racers. We have experienced the injustices that multinational corporations often inflict on small rural communities. The diversity that we see in our community today is reflected in the diverse collection of stories that make up our history.

## Research Methodology

## PODER EMMA / Emma Community Ownership Project and Popular Education Consultants

### Participatory research and planning: Beyond an "outside expert" approach.

The community-based research and planning effort described in this report was unusual, particularly for a community in the United States. In most US community development efforts, outside experts come into a community to conduct research, and then feed the findings from the research back to the community as they facilitate the development of a neighborhood plan. Often the research is done under the leadership of a planner (or other government agency worker), a nonprofit staff person, or an academic researcher; the research is collected by staff members at organizations or by university students. Community members participate by providing data for the research and being part of the planning process where goals and strategies are developed.

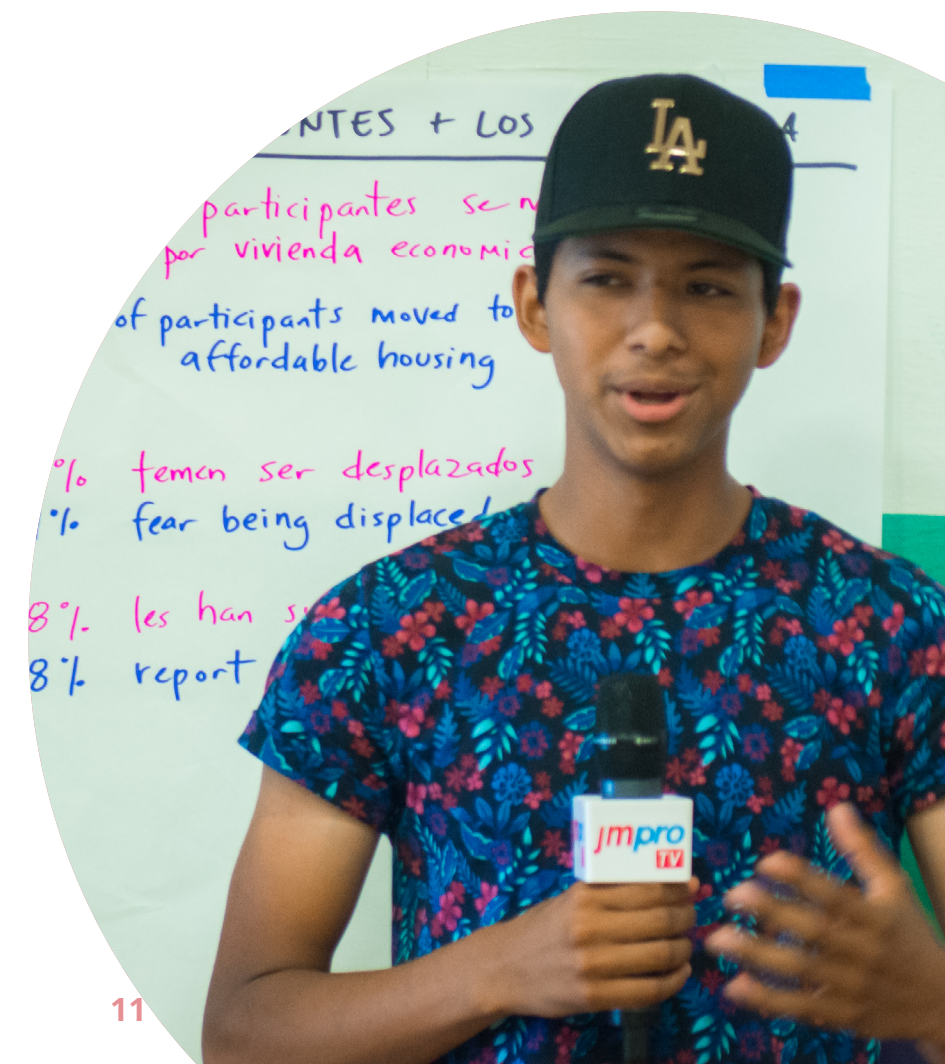
While there is nothing inherently wrong with this "outside expert" approach to community planning and development, it was not what we wanted to do. In the Emma community, we had a vision of a research and planning effort where we designed the research, we developed the research questions, we collected the data, we analyzed the data, and we presented the data back to the community and facilitated the development of goals and strategies. We wanted to do our own research, because we wanted our goals and strategies to be fully our own. Another reason we wanted to conduct our own research was because we have had repeated ICE raids in our community. Residents feel wary and threatened, justifiably, when someone comes to their door. We didn't want people coming in from outside of our community and causing additional fear and trauma, even if they were well-meaning.

We therefore envisioned a participatory research process, a participatory planning process, and a participatory development process. We had the vision, but we didn't exactly know how to make that vision a reality. We needed some help to develop our capacities as researchers. So we contacted Popular Education Consultants, Inc. (PECI) for training, support, and guidance.

### Popular Education Consultants, Inc. (PECI): Participatory Action Research.

Popular Education Consultants, Inc (PECI) ([www.populareducationconsultants.com](http://www.populareducationconsultants.com)) has a wide range of experiences and knowledge related to popular education, participatory action research, and participatory development. As mentioned above, we worked with Isabel Vinent Gramany and Reca Fernandez, both of whom have Ph.D.s in Adult Education, focusing on popular education and participatory action research. Isabel and Reca are national and international experts on these subjects. In a recent handbook on community organizing (Roots to Power: A Manual For Grassroots Organizing, a 2016 book by Lee Staples), Reca and Isabel were asked to write the book's chapter on popular education and participatory action research. We outline briefly these two approaches in this report, but if you want more information, the chapter from the organizing book goes into far greater detail. PECI's website also has some excellent resources and on-the-ground examples of popular education and participatory action research.

PECI taught us about how to use popular education as an overarching approach to participatory community development. They taught us how to plan and carry out participatory action research – research that we developed and carried out, research that answered



the questions we needed answered, research that led directly to collective action in our community. This is the core of participatory action research.

### **Popular education, participatory action research, and participatory development**

**Popular education.** Popular education provides the overarching theoretical and practical framework for the whole participatory research and planning process described in this report. Popular education is education for collective action and social change. It is based on learning from experience and dialogue. The ideas behind this approach to education came from Paolo Freire in the Global South and Myles Horton and the Highlander Center in the US. To make this more concrete, one model of popular education (called the spiral model) has the following steps: (1) start by asking people to talk about experiences in their everyday lives; (2) work with them to make connections among their experiences; (3) introduce new or outside information to complement their own knowledge; (4) practice skills and knowledge learned; (5) form strategies for action, take action, and return to the group to reflect upon that action.

For Isabel and Reza at Popular Education Consultants, Inc. (PECI), the power of popular education comes from the theory and practice of Paolo Freire. (See the book mentioned above, *Roots to Power*, for more information.) According to Freire, popular education aims to get people talking about the social issues in which they are embedded. Through dialogue about these social issues, people come to see them differently, more critically. This process of conscientization, of developing critical consciousness, is the core of popular education. As a popular educator (one of the roles that PECI played in Emma), one doesn't lecture about folks' reality or give them knowledge or ideas so that they can better analyze their reality. Rather, a popular educator uses participatory processes to motivate and spur people to reflect collectively on their own lived experiences, and to use that to develop more critical analyses of the systemic injustices that they face. A popular educator is not neutral, because she or he may experience injustices in the same way. But the role of the popular educator is to draw forth wisdom from people's experiences, rather than to "teach" an all-finished and static truth.

For us, popular education is powerful because it is learning and action that emerges from our lived experiences, from the challenges we face in our everyday lives. In our community meetings, we come together and bring out the wisdom that we each have gained

by struggling through our day-to-day lives (particularly as we struggle against systemic injustices or systemic racism). We engage in dialogue; we learn from each other; we start to see things differently. We integrate our different pieces of experiential wisdom to develop a collective analysis of the injustices we face. We then use that analysis to develop plans for collective action. We develop a collective analysis, a collective voice; we take collective action. We try something. Then we come back together, and we do the whole process again, and we reflect on what went well and what could be improved.

In popular education, it's all coming from us, from what we know, from what we have learned as we've struggled to live our lives and do the best we can. In our work at PODER EMMA / Emma Community Ownership Project, everything we have done, everything we do, and everything we'll do from here on out is done from a popular education perspective.

In our community, we had previous experience with popular education. But not participatory action research. This is where we needed support, training, and guidance from Popular Education Consultants, Inc.

### **Participatory action research.**

Participatory action research (or PAR) is an approach to community-driven research that can be seen as "bottom up" and "inside out," compared to the way that research is often conducted in communities. First, PAR is unique because it's extremely participatory. In PAR, it is local community members who are the researchers. A team of local people comes together, receives training on how to do research, and then designs and carries out the research process in full. With training and support, community members determine the goal of the research, develop the research questions, determine the research sample, determine research methods, collect the data, enter and manage the data, analyze the data, decide how to present the data back to the community, and facilitate a process where local people come together to use the data from the research to improve their community. This last point illustrates the second aspect of PAR that is unique: it is research for action. PAR is research designed to generate new knowledge, as in more conventional approaches to research – but with PAR the knowledge gained is always the catalyst for collective action, social change, or community transformation.

For Isabel and Reza of Popular Education Consultants, Inc. (PECI), PAR is intertwined with popular education. (See the book mentioned above, *Roots to Power*, for

more information.) In both PAR and popular education, knowledge is developed collectively, through dialogue, and is based on lived experiences. Orlando Fals-Borda, a founder of PAR, conceptualized what he called a popular science, which aims to understand the practical, common sense knowledge that grassroots leaders have gained through living their daily lives. In *Roots to Power*, Reza and Isabel write that PAR has three core elements: (1) research that develops knowledge through collective methods, (2) popular education processes that include the development of critical consciousness or conscientization, and (3) collective action for community transformation or social change. PAR has the goal of delivering research capacities to low-wealth and marginalized communities, so that they can transform their lives on their own terms. This is what PECI helped us do in Emma. In the section below on research methods, we outline in more detail how we all came together to make this a reality.

In addition to support from PECI in planning and carrying out our participatory action research (PAR) project, we also received support from Davia Young, a Tzedek Social Justice Fellow working with Cothinkk (a Western NC giving circle focused on the social well-being of communities of color). On the Tzedek Fellows website, Davia talks about her passion for PAR. Davia's words provide a concise summary of why this approach worked so well in Emma:

Through my undergraduate studies, I developed a passion for Participatory Action Research, which aims to disrupt conventional forms of knowledge production by centering community voices and narratives, and finding community-led solutions. PAR is dedicated to changing who our society deems "experts" and who decides what makes research "valid."

**Participatory development.** Participatory development refers to the active involvement of people in the planning, development, implementation, and evaluation of projects and activities that affect them. Participatory development is community development done not to people, or for people, or even with people – but development done by the people in a local community. In Emma, we didn't want community development where we were the target of outsiders' goals and agendas, however well-intentioned. We didn't want to be seen as clients or beneficiaries. We wanted a form of community development built from our lived experiences and daily realities, from our understandings of the challenges we face and how to fix them. We wanted community development where we determine, drive, and control the entire process. Again,

this is what PECI helped us do.

### **Research methods: What we actually did, step-by-step**

In this section, we outline exactly what we did in terms of our research methodology. For all of the stages of the research outlined below, we received training and coaching from Reza and Isabel at Popular Education Consultants, Inc. (PECI). The first training, a general introduction to participatory action research, took place before we started (on February 18, 2018). PECI began by introducing us to the philosophy, theory, and methodology of participatory action research. They then focused in on research methods, and provided examples of various methods we might use. We then honed in on how to develop a survey and how to go door-to-door in our community to collect data. We started to develop our survey, and we role-played interviewing survey respondents. This day-long training laid the groundwork for the work we did together; our learning from that training is the core of everything we outline below.

Quantitative and qualitative research methods. Our participatory action research project was based on both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Quantitative research methods focus on numbers as data. We collected our quantitative data through our survey, which we developed. Some questions were closed-ended, meaning that respondents had to choose an answer among a list. We analyzed their responses to these closed-ended survey questions by simply totaling up the number of answers to each item on the list of possible responses.

Qualitative research methods, on the other hand, are based on words rather than numbers. Qualitative research is typically collected through interviews, focus groups, surveys, participant-observation, or document review. As mentioned, we collected our data through surveys. Some of the questions were open-ended, meaning that respondents could answer however they wanted to (rather than choosing a response from a list). When we analyzed the data from these questions, we looked at people's comments (rather than a number of responses), and we analyzed the data by "coding" people's comments (a process described in the data analysis section below). Qualitative data analysis is typically based on coding people's comments; quantitative data analysis, on the other hand, is based on the statistical analysis of numbers. Our study used both research methods and both data analysis methods.

Site selection and sample frame. Site selection refers to how researchers choose the place in which they conduct

their research. The site in which our research was carried out was our community, Emma. We selected this site because it's our community, and this was community-based, community-driven, community-focused research on making our community a better place to be.

Sample frame refers to the specific sample, or group of people, that participated in a research project. We conducted interviews with 166 people living across 15 different mobile home communities, apartment complexes, or streets in the Emma community. Survey respondents reported living in Emma for between 6 months and 69 years; the average was 11 years.

The people who completed our survey identified themselves racially, ethnically, or culturally in the following ways:

- 86% identified as Latino / Hispanic
- 4% identified as "other" (and they specified their identity as related to their place of origin – Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, or Ecuador)
- 23% identified as immigrants
- 8% identified as white
- 5% identified as Black / African American
- 2% identified as Native American
- 2% identified as indigenous
- 2% identified as multiracial.

Our research sample had the following language characteristics, when respondents were asked to identify the language(s) used in their home:

- 56% bilingual, mostly English and Spanish (but also English and Hnahnu / Otomi, Marshallese, American Sign Language, and German)
- 37% Spanish
- 11% English

Our sample frame focused on residents of mobile home communities, because these are the people in our community who are at the highest risk of displacement. In terms where they live, our sample had the following characteristics:

- 91% in mobile homes
- 4% in apartments
- 4% in houses

- 1% other
- One particular risk related to displacement in our community is when residents own their trailer, but rent the land on which their trailer sits. Since this combination is more likely to result in displacement than other housing situations, we over-sampled people in this situation. In terms of the relationship between ownership of their home and ownership of their land, our sample had the following characteristics:

- 70% own their trailer but rent their lot
- 22% rent (both their housing and the land)
- 9% own their trailer and the land on which it sits

Survey design. We collected data through a survey, which we administered verbally, talking face-to-face with community members. The survey had 15 questions. (See Appendix B for a list of the questions). Seven of the questions were closed-ended (i.e., people chose their answer from a set list of possible answers), and eight were open-ended (i.e., people responded openly, however they wanted, to our questions). Our research team developed the questions and decided how to word them. We produced the questionnaires in English and Spanish. We also decided to add visual images to our questions, because literacy is a challenge among many of our community members. (See Appendix C for the visual supplements to our survey).

Data collection. Data from the survey that we developed (see Appendices B and C) were collected by 12 researchers. As mentioned, all of the researchers had participated in training on how to conduct research from Popular Education Consultants, Inc. (PECI). Concretely, collecting the data refers to administering the survey questionnaire. We did this verbally, face-to-face, door-to-door, in our communities. Each survey interview or administration took between 15 and 45 minutes. Our research team varied in the number of interviews we conducted; one team member conducted 29 interviews, while another conducted 3.

The process of collecting data took two months. We created a map of all of the mobile home communities in the Emma neighborhood; we then designated pairs of researchers to go door-to-door in each trailer park. We also interviewed people that we came across through the process of doing our research. There was an aspect of our sampling and data collection that was purposeful, and an aspect that was more random, based more on neighborhood residents who were interested in participating. We often conducted

our research interviews on weekends or during the evenings, when people were more likely to be home. We also conducted research door-to-door during the day, which is when many elderly neighbors were able to speak with us. As we talked with people, we wrote down their responses directly on the survey. These responses were our data, both quantitative and qualitative.

It is important that everyone on our research team was known in our community. The researchers were residents' neighbors. Survey respondents knew the researchers' faces, if not their names. We also made name tags or badges with PODER EMMA / Emma Community Ownership Project on them. We wanted people to know us and trust us when we came to their door, because we had very recently had a week's worth of ICE raids in our community. Residents were extremely wary, with good reason. Our name tags and familiar faces were important in our research. We have so much fear in our community; we didn't want to trigger any further trauma by having unfamiliar outsiders going door-to-door.

Data management. Once we administered the surveys, we entered the responses into computers. We put each survey into SurveyMonkey, a free online survey tool. One member of our research team designed the online survey in SurveyMonkey; another team member created the visual survey tool; and two other members of the research team did all of the data entry.

We received coaching, support, and accompaniment in our data management process from Davia Young, a 2017-18 Tzedek Social Justice Fellow working with Cothinkk (a Western NC giving circle focused on the social well-being of communities of color). As mentioned above, Davia has experience with participatory action research. She designed the SurveyMonkey form to input the data, and she helped our research team with data entry. She also went through the trainings from Popular Education Consultants, Inc. with our research team, and she provided support during the community workshop and analysis process. Davia was both part of our research team and a research coach and support person.

Data analysis: Quantitative data. We analyzed our data in two phases: first, quantitative data analysis, and then later, qualitative data analysis. For the quantitative data analysis, we analyzed the quantitative SurveyMonkey data from our survey on computers. Basically, we totaled and summarized the responses to the various questions on our survey that had closed-ended responses (or lists of choices respondents could select). Once we had summarized

the answers to the quantitative questions on our survey, we developed a slide show of the summary findings, so that we could communicate the research findings quickly at the upcoming half-day Community Workshop. We developed this slide show presentation ourselves, graphing the frequency of responses to the closed-ended questions and summarizing these in a PowerPoint slide show.

Data analysis: Qualitative data. Analyzing the qualitative data, the open-ended comments from our survey, was more complex. The best practice, most rigorous approach to qualitative data analysis is called coding. Coding is essentially a form of data reduction; qualitative researchers simplify, through various coding techniques, the raw data of transcriptions (in our case, the written-down answers to the open-ended questions on the survey). Coding is a specialized research skill, so we asked Popular Education Consultants, Inc. (PECI) to come spend a half-day with us – to train us and coach us through the qualitative data analysis process. Twelve of our community researchers spent a half day with PECI (May 26, 2018), learning how to analyze our qualitative data and going through the data analysis process.

When we "coded" the qualitative data from our research, we read through all of the comments from the open-ended questions on our survey. As we read through the comments, we looked for "themes" that recurred, themes that emerged from the data. As we came across various themes, we used codes, literally a tag or a label attached to a chunk of data. The chunks of data were different sizes – words, phrases, sentences, or whole comments. We then used the codes to consolidate and retrieve data, and to create meaning across all of the various comments about what people in our survey had said when we talked to them. The codes allowed us to categorize chunks of data, so we could quickly find, pull out, and cluster comments or responses related to a particular research questions, hypothesis, idea, construct, or theme.

Here's how it worked, more concretely. One of our survey questions asked about strengths and challenges that people face as members of the Emma community. As we read through the comments on the challenges that people face, we saw a lot of comments that clustered around a few key areas. For instance, twenty-nine respondents made a comment that generally related to security in our community (for example, "safety, breaking and entering" and "doors on mobile homes are easy to break into"). As we read through the comments (the qualitative data), we wrote "security"



beside any comment that had to do with this issue. The code in this case was security. By coding all of the comments about security in our data, we were then able to pull out and look across all of the comments on this issue and make sense of the overarching concern. The coding process also helped us prioritize important themes. The themes that appeared most frequently in the data (such as security, increases in rent, changes in rules on the part of landowners) were ideas that we wanted to be sure to put on the agenda for the Community Workshop, which took place the following day and is described below.

Presentation of the research findings to the community: The Community Workshop. On May 27, 2018, PODER EMMA / Emma Community Ownership Project organized a Community Workshop, where we invited people from across the Emma community. We had planned this workshop in detail the day before in our session with Isabel and Reca of Popular Education Consultants, Inc. (PECI). Reca and Isabel were at the Community Workshop. Members of our research team facilitated the meeting and all of the small-group break-out sessions, but it was nice to have Peci there in case we needed them.

Another important part of the Community Workshop was the presence and engagement of our neighborhood youth. As mentioned, a group of young people in the Emma Community are working on a documentary about the history, realities and visions of neighborhood residents. This is a collaborative effort by community youth, PODER EMMA / Emma Community Ownership Project, and Word on the Street / Asheville Writers in the Schools and Community. The young people's documentary crew covered the event, taking photos and video, and interviewing neighborhood residents. JPro Community Media was at the Community Workshop providing the young people with hands on support.

At the May 27 Community Workshop, we presented the data from the surveys (both the quantitative data and our summary of the qualitative data). The goals for this workshop were to present the major findings of our research to community members, invite them to further make sense of our findings (using popular education methods), and begin to identify some ideas to address issues of gentrification and displacement in the Emma community. Around 65 people attended the workshop, which lasted from around 9 to 1 on a Sunday. The workshop took place in the gym at Emma Elementary School. We ended with a catered lunch from a local business, El Torito, in the school cafeteria.

We began the workshop by presenting the PowerPoint slideshow summarizing the results from our research. This presentation took about a half-hour. We had already entered the quantitative data into the slide show. The day before, as we analyzed the qualitative data, we created slides that summarized the qualitative data as well. We presented the data in both Spanish and English, with simultaneous interpretation for monolingual people to make sure that everyone could participate in their first language.

After we presented the data, the bulk of the Community Workshop focused on inviting participants to dialogue more deeply about four core issues that emerged from the research. These small group dialogues were facilitated by members of the research team. We had determined these four issues the previous day, after we had analyzed the qualitative data and looked over all of the data from our survey.

The four issues that we invited deeper conversation around were the following:

1. Housing and Displacement – generating through small group dialogue an analysis of both threats and potential solutions related to housing and displacement;
2. Landowners and Landless People – generating through dialogue both threats and potential solutions related to whether or not community members own the land on which their home sits (which is not typically the case in mobile home communities).
3. Community Infrastructure and Park – a dialogue and mapping exercise about the creation of infrastructure, recreational spaces, cultural and historical markers, and a community park in Emma, and what that would ideally look like;
4. Hostility and Safety – an analysis of safety issues that Emma residents face including tension between neighbors, renters and owners, frequent breaking and entering, and issues related to law enforcement and ICE.

In each of these four small group dialogue sessions, facilitators (members of our research team) used popular education processes and visual representations to help participants learn from each other and develop an analysis of a particular issue. For instance, in the group dialogue focusing on housing and displacement, participants had a small group dialogue about what people see as major problems and possibilities related to housing and displacement. Participants used pink

and green arrows to list the most important problems (pink arrows) and possibilities (green arrows); they put these arrows pointing towards and away from a drawing of a mobile home / trailer on a large piece of flip chart paper. They then brainstormed their favorite solutions, as potential seeds for collective action. Each of the four breakout groups had a similarly participatory and visually-focused process.

Once each of the four groups had further analyzed the issue on which they were focused, two participants from each breakout group presented an overview of that group's analysis and ideas for action to the larger group. We walked around, as a large group, and listened as the reporters outlined their group's analyses and ideas.

We ended the Community Workshop by inviting participants who were interested in moving the work forward to join a group who would be meeting to look further at all of the data (from the survey and the Community Workshop) and develop more concrete goals and strategies for collective action.

Using the data to develop plans for collective action. Because our research was participatory action research, the whole point of all the hard work we did collecting, analyzing, and presenting data was to spur and deepen collective action for community transformation. When we finished and presented our research, our research had ended – but our work was just beginning. In the months following the Community Workshop, working groups met to take all of the data (from the survey and the Community Workshop) and develop concrete goals and strategies for collective action. While we know that our goals, strategies, and plans will evolve as time goes on, we came up with a beginning set of goals and strategies in a series of meetings across the summer following the Community Workshop. We summarize these goals and strategies below, in the section titled Conclusion and Next Steps, and we present the full list of goals and strategies in Appendix D.

## Research Findings I: What We Learned from the Survey

**Overview of our research findings.** The following two sections outline the findings from our participatory action research. There are two groups or clusters of findings from our research.

First, through the findings from our survey research (going door-to-door and interviewing 166 people using the survey in Appendix B), we came to better understand community members' views on Emma as a

community and on the threats that we are facing related to gentrification and displacement. We present these findings in this section. We summarize the data from our survey and provide some of the richest, most compelling quotations from respondents to give a sense of how community members are thinking and feeling.

Second, through the small group dialogues in the May 27 Community Workshop, we worked with Emma residents to further analyze the findings from the survey and to begin to develop ideas for collective action, ideas for addressing the issues that emerged from our survey research. The analyses and ideas that emerged from the May 27 workshop are merely the seeds for collective action. Since then, we have been meeting to further refine and prioritize the ideas that emerged from the Community Workshop. We will continue to revise our goals and strategies as we move forward with our work. We outline the analyses and ideas that emerged from the Community Workshop in the section titled Research Findings II: Analyses and Ideas from the Community Workshop.

**Summary of findings from the survey.** Below we summarize findings from the survey of 166 residents of the Emma community. We provide summaries of the data (both quantitative and qualitative); we also provide some of the most compelling direct quotations from respondents (the qualitative data), to provide a sense of the richness of what we found in our research.

1. Rents in our community have gone up. Among our survey respondents, 78% said that their rent has gone up in the past five years; 22% said that their rent has not gone up. For those who saw rent increases, the average increase was \$64 (with a range of \$5-\$290).
2. People move to Emma because it's convenient and affordable, and because they have family here. We asked respondents why they moved to Emma. The responses are summarized below. (Note that respondents could select more than one response to the question.)
  - It's a convenient location (44% of all respondents)
  - I had the opportunity to purchase a home (40% of all respondents)
  - I had family in the neighborhood (38% of all respondents)
  - There was affordable rental housing (32% of all respondents)

- Others in the neighborhood speak my language (11% of all respondents)
- I wanted my children to go to Emma Elementary School (10% of all respondents)
- Sense of community (10% of all respondents)

3. People stay here for the same reasons they came. We also asked respondents why they continue to live in Emma. The responses are summarized below. (Note that respondents could select more than one response to the question.)

- It's a convenient location (58% of all respondents)
- I have family in the neighborhood (36% of all respondents)
- I own my own home (33% of all respondents)
- I pay affordable rent (28% of all respondents)
- Sense of community (22% of all respondents)
- I want my children to study in the neighborhood schools (20% of all respondents)
- Others in the neighborhood speak my language (17% of all respondents)

4. People fear displacement (being forced to leave Emma), for various reasons. When we asked survey respondents whether or not they feared displacement, 84% of all respondents said that they did. We asked them what they thought was most likely to lead to their displacement. The responses are summarized below. (Note that respondents could select more than one response to the question.)

- Increasing cost of rent (43% of all respondents)
- Higher-income people and businesses coming into our community (42% of all respondents)
- Police / immigration policies and enforcement (34% of all respondents)
- Eviction (28% of all respondents)
- Increasing cost of property taxes (17% of all respondents)
- None of the above (16% of all respondents)

5. The main benefits of living in a mobile home community are affordability, location, and community. An open-ended question on our

survey asked respondents to reflect on the benefits of living in a mobile home community. As we coded the qualitative data, the three major benefits that emerged were affordability, location, and community. Some of the quotations from respondents below provide a sense of what mobile home community residents are thinking and feeling.

- I don't feel isolated because I am close to neighbors.
- There is community because in mobile home neighborhoods people cluster together.
- Living in a mobile home is an option for stable housing, it is accessible both in price and maintenance. The mobile homes in my neighborhood are in a safe area, and they are close to the school and to stores where we can buy affordable and healthy food.
- It's a good way to be able to own your own home while you raise a family, its affordable.
- A mobile home is still a home, and some people are more comfortable being in communities surrounded by people.
- I am beyond thankful for the affordable opportunity because now I have more of my paycheck left over to do things with my children.
- There is a sense of community with welcoming people who take care of each other.

6. The main challenges faced by people living in a mobile home community are gentrification, quality of housing, and landlords' rules. An open-ended question on our survey asked respondents to reflect on the challenges of living in a mobile home community. As we coded the qualitative data, the three major challenges that emerged were gentrification, quality of housing, and landlords' rules. Some of the quotations from respondents below provide a sense of what residents are thinking and feeling about the challenges they face living in a mobile home community.

- Changes that can affect you when you least expect it, such as changes in park rules and higher rents
- Rising lot rents
- Risk of displacement due to development companies

- There are no playgrounds in the mobile home parks, they won't let us put up fences around our yards or have storage sheds. We're not allowed to do things to the property to improve our living space.
- Light bill was very expensive during the winter. Usually drafty. Need more insulation underneath. Water lines need to be buried or insulated because they freeze and sometimes break. Hot during summer, cold during winter. Heating bill over \$400 during winter.
- Safety, breaking and entering
- You're stuck here in the park when new owners come, they tell us to change or get out. How can you run people off like that? In our neighborhood, some people ain't got the income to fix homes up, they just don't. It's low income housing, some people just don't got it. For example, the new owners want us to put new underpinnings, but some of us are on a fixed income. I work, so I will improve my mobile home, but some people won't be able to and then they'll kick them out.
- Doors, windows and exterior walls on mobile homes are easier to break into.

7. The ways that we could improve the Emma community relate to maintenance, recreation, and safety. An open-ended question on our survey asked respondents to reflect on the improvements that could be made in the Emma community to make life better for community members and families. As we coded the qualitative data, the three major areas of improvement related to maintenance, recreation, and safety. Some of the quotations below provide a sense of how respondents view improving our community.

- Have more communication with the landlords and the authorities
- More people need to understand that a trailer park is not meant to be destroyed.
- More safety in our community because the fear of separation in families is very present.
- Regain trust in police so that we can feel protected, not persecuted.
- More space for children to play, parks, soccer fields, basketball courts,

- Infrastructure (sidewalks, crosswalks, park, traffic lights and signs, speed bumps, roofs at bus stops, more connection to sewer systems, road repair, better trimming of trees at dangerous curves on streets, more public lighting,)

8. The things that make Emma a special neighborhood are its location, its diversity, and how safe it is. An open-ended question on our survey asked respondents to reflect on what makes the Emma community special. As we coded the qualitative data, the three major characteristics that make Emma special were its location, its diversity, and how safe it is. In terms of location: many respondents mentioned how close the neighborhood is to everything that they need. We feel that this is important in a low-wealth community, where people may not have cars or access to drivers' licenses. Some of the quotations from respondents below provide a sense of what residents most appreciate about our community.

- There are people here organizing to protect and defend their rights. There is cultural programming for kids. Everyone knows each other and looks out for each other. There are lots of different languages. There are lots of family networks here, small businesses, and history.
- I have been living in this area for 19 years, its where I grew up. I wouldn't move to another area because I feel like I would have to start over again. Emma is affordable compared to the rest of Asheville.
- The diversity of working class families, and seeing our children growing towards an excellent future.
- Emma is special because it is a neighborhood that has a lot of solidarity, commitment and participation. We participate in social, economic and educational aspects of our community. Above all, we have a sense of responsibility towards each other and mutual respect.
- There are many families that look like mine.
- I love this community, we work hard for the common good.
- We need to maintain the history of Emma.
- The formation of a huge concentration of

Latino people that has been formed over 20 years.

- I love Emma, there are good schools. My kids went here. It's a close and local community.
- Lots of people here grew up here. You can tell that it's an old neighborhood and we tend to like it like it, that's why we stay here, we like to live this way even if it doesn't make sense to other people.
- There are many Hispanic people, I feel like I'm in my home country.
- I like how the neighborhood is designed, there is still green space for trees and plants, everything natural hasn't been destroyed.
- People are great, the land is beautiful, it's not too busy.
- I grew up here, this is what I call home!
- Everyone sees each other as friends or family and we are very united. We all feel at home because a lot of us share the same culture.
- I feel trust, which makes me feel safer.

9. Several things are crucial for Emma's future: communication and services, quality of life, and mutual respect. As the last question on our survey, we told respondents that we would be sharing the findings from our research with local government and organizations that work with and serve our community, so that they can better understand the strengths, needs, and dreams of our neighborhood. We asked respondents if there was anything else about their experiences living in Emma that they would like to share or add. As we coded the qualitative data, three themes emerged related to the answers to this question: communication and services, quality of life, and mutual respect. Some of the quotations below from respondents provide a sense of what community members are referring to.

- We are a community that works hard to improve the place we live.
- There are lots of brilliant and talented youth in this neighborhood but there are not a lot of physical spaces or enriching environments made available to them outside of their homes.
- Don't let investors come and chase us out of our homes.

- The city's expanding footprint is making it tighter here.
- People litter here, there is trash all in the woods, but it's because we have to pay for trash disposal and people don't have money, so they throw it on the road. Our community can't afford to dispose of garbage.
- Emma has been my home for 10 years, and here I have found love for my family, opportunities to work and to become involved in my neighborhood. For my children, Emma is a place where they feel included and have the opportunity to dream of their future. I love Emma.
- Listen to people, not to businesses!
- Agriculture is a way of life here, cows, goats, chickens, plants. Older residents keep it going as a way of life.
- I believe that as parents we are already spending a lot of time at work trying to support our families and even though our rent here is more affordable, we are still struggling. If the rent keeps going up I believe that parents will need to spend twice the time working and won't be able to pay enough attention to their children.
- I grew up here and loved it, still do.
- Life in Emma is different, but it's good. And people look at it wrong.
- We need more resources to protect the mobile home parks from eviction.
- I wouldn't want to see a day when families like mine are forced to leave.

## Research Findings II: Analyses and Ideas from the Community Workshop

Summary of findings from the Community Workshop. Popular Education Consultants, Inc. (PECI) produced a report summarizing the process and findings from the Community Workshop on May 27, 2018. This is available from PODER EMMA / Emma Community Ownership Project. Below we summarize the key findings from the Community Workshop, as laid out in the report that PECI wrote. These findings, compared to the findings from the survey research, focus more on the seeds for collective action – on what we can do together

as a community to address the issues that emerged from the survey. This emphasis on collective action, as mentioned above, is a core feature of participatory action research.

This section provides a sense of the four small group breakout sessions during the Community Workday. For each of the four small groups, we summarize what the group did and what analyses and ideas emerged from that small group's work.

### Small group dialogue 1: Housing and Displacement.

The small group dialogue on housing and displacement was a brainstorming session where participants wrote on arrows (green and pink) various factors that conserve our community's housing (green arrows) and factors that lead to or cause displacement (pink arrows). The idea was to give a big picture of gentrification and displacement in our community, and to brainstorm ways we might prevent displacement.

1. The challenges of displacement. Participants identified several challenges related to displacement, ranging from personal or individual effects (e.g., emotional damage, losing friends and relationships, losing one's vision for life) to more societal effects (e.g., displacement weakens local economies, it brings about economic uncertainty for families).

2. Addressing the challenges of displacement. Participants identified potential ways to address the challenges of displacement, including creating housing cooperatives, real estate cooperatives, resident owned mobile home communities and neighborhood loan funds, negotiating with owners for renters to have first right of refusal if there is a sale, and advocating for legislation that protects renters or supports the formation of resident owned mobile home communities.

3. Resident owned communities: One way of preventing displacement. One idea for addressing the challenges related to displacement is an approach called resident owned communities. As outlined above, Emma is home to many mobile home communities, or trailer parks. In many of these, residents may own their home, but not the land on which their home sits. If the landowner decides to sell the land, residents have no choice but to move. Often they are unable to move their home, for various reasons. Thus not only are they displaced from their community, but they lose their home (and the investment it represents) as well.

One response to this set of challenges is an innovative

approach to affordable housing called resident owned communities. In this approach, residents of mobile home communities come together as a collective to purchase a mobile home community or trailer park. In other words, the residents become the owners, as a collective. Emma (and the Erwin District) currently have three resident owned mobile home communities, of various sizes and in various stages of development. In this small group dialogue at the Community Workshop, this seemed to participants like a promising response to challenges related to displacement.

### Small group dialogue 2: Landowners and Landless People.

The dialogue in this small group focused on differences among Emma community members who own their land and those who rent their land or their house (or both). The idea was to explore whether land ownership makes a difference when thinking about displacement.

#### 1. The challenges of renting land and / or homes.

Many of the participants in this small group own their homes (or trailers), but not the land on which they sit. Participants reported that this results in many challenges, including the following:

- We are dependent on mobile home community owners; we don't control our own destiny in terms of housing.
- We have no choice but to obey landowners' rules or threats, even when they feel unreasonable.
- We face uncertainty about potentially being forced to move (because a landowner decides to sell the land out from under us), and trauma when we are displaced.
- When we are displaced, we lose our friends and our community. We lose our way of life.
- Rents, home prices, and land prices are going up so fast in our community that it is difficult to afford any of them.
- Land and houses sell so fast. People with access, knowledge, and capital can act fast. We don't have any of those, so we can't act fast. We're at a disadvantage from the start.
- When we ask for loans to buy our homes or our land, we are offered very high interest rates; this makes it challenging to buy our homes and land.

- Landowners depend on us, but they don't listen to us. We need a collective voice to negotiate with them.

2. Resident owned communities: Again, listed as a primary solution. This small group, like the small group focusing on housing and displacement, lifted up resident owned communities as a way of addressing the challenges of renting, of not owning land. As this group put it, we need to unite, so we can all buy land together. This group listed potential allies in the work of creating more resident owned communities in Emma: lenders or loan funds, Buncombe County Government, Habitat for Humanity, and attorney allies, including Pisgah Legal Services and Carolina Common Enterprise.

3. Resident associations and collective structures; Another potential solution. In response to the many challenges outlined above, participants in this small group dialogue felt that Emma residents could form neighborhood associations, in both mobile home communities and other residential communities. Neighborhood associations would provide a collective, unified voice for communicating with mobile home community owners. For instance, Resident associations could negotiate with mobile home community owners to have first right of refusal, if a sale of the land becomes imminent. By coming together and pooling resources, residents could potentially purchase land as a collective that none of us could afford as individuals. We also realized that we have people in our communities with many home maintenance skills; we could potentially create a pool of people with maintenance and construction experience to better maintain our communities. We also realized that if we are organized, we would have the collective voice and power to advocate for issues related to gentrification and displacement at a policy level with local, state, and federal government entities.

### Small group dialogue 3: Community Infrastructure and Park.

One of the small group dialogues at the Community Workshop focused on a vision of a community park, public spaces and recreational areas in Emma. Participants were presented with a large drawing of the parcel of land on which the park would most likely sit. They were invited to dialogue about what the park could look like, and to draw an ideal map of the park, as well as to hold in balance the tension around how to create community resources that don't further

accelerate gentrification and displacement. Four major themes emerged from this small group's dialogue and conversation:

1. A community park. PODER EMMA / Emma Community Ownership Project had already organized community members around a vision of a community park in Emma during participation in the InvestHealth Initiative. Prior to the Community Workday, and prior to the participatory action research process outlined in this report, we had interviewed over 50 community members to begin to create a vision for the park. During the Community Workshop in May 2018, twenty or so community members drew a map of an ideal park for Emma. Over 100 community members have committed volunteer hours if the park moves forward. With or without funding, this small group felt that it was useful to continue to move forward on plans for a community park in Emma. Indeed, the visual map of the ideal park that emerged from this small group dialogue will be useful in moving the park's planning forward.

2. Other recreational assets. While much of the conversation in this small group planning session focused on ideas related to a potential community park, participants also had other ideas related to recreational opportunities. These included recreational assets such as developing a soccer field, developing new spaces for children to play, remaking vacant parking lots or vacant lots into parks or gardens, and developing a recreational center and community commercial kitchen.

3. More community based cultural assets. This small group also had visions of developing more public, community-based cultural assets in Emma. These included cultural assets such as murals, multilingual signs, signs that tell the stories and history of the Emma community, and other public displays that reflect the diversity of Emma as a community. Residents expressed a desire for clear entryway signs into Emma so that you know you have come into the community.

4. Public infrastructure. This conversation expressed a similar concern around the desire to make investments in infrastructure in the community without accelerating displacement and gentrification by making it a more "desireable" neighborhood for more affluent families to move into. It was noted that infrastructure such as sidewalks, crosswalks, improved bus stops and public transportation, traffic lights, speed bumps,

sewage, and public lighting are all needed.

### Small group dialogue 2: Hostility and Safety.

In this small group session, participants used a drawing of an iceberg to analyze experiences of hostility and safety related to three different levels (personal, institutional, and systemic). The personal level of analysis focused acts of hostility from individuals, neighbors, and individual experiences with breaking and entering. The institutional level of analysis focused on landowners and renters. The systemic level focused on the police, Sherriff's Department, and ICE. The group analyzed threats and potential solutions related to hostility and safety at these different levels.

1. 1. Individual hostilities. Emma is an extremely diverse community of recently arrived immigrants, immigrant families that have been in Emma for decades, black and white families. There is still palpable uncertainty, fear, and prejudice at times among racial and ethnic groups. Participants at the Emma Community Workshop identified fear among Emma residents, a feeling that there is a racial hierarchy in the community and some evidence of hostility among neighbors. Other participants noted hostility at work, in their jobs. Participants believe that these hostilities could be overcome through relationship- and community-building. Participants also spoke in depth about the frequency of breaking and entering in the neighborhood, mostly due to the vulnerability of mobile homes due to their window and door structures, and the role that race, ethnicity, language and immigration status play in terms of effective response from law enforcement to breaking and entering.

2. Institutional hostilities between landowners and renters. In the small group dialogue at the Emma Community Workshop, participants decided that hostilities between landowners and renters are largely due to competing interests (i.e., the interests of trailer park owners vs. residents who own their trailer but rent the land on which it sits). Participants also discussed that some mobile home park owners have long-standing relationships with many of their tenants and understand their daily realities, while others are completely disconnected and uninterested. Key problems that participants identified included the fear of the possibilities of landowners selling the land on which mobile home owners home sits, strict rules about parking in mobile home communities, strict rules about upkeep and upgrading of mobile homes, and

the fact that landowners do not often support the maintenance of renters' trailers. Potential solutions that participants identified included building stronger relationships with mobile home park owners when possible, understanding owners' rules and talking with them when rules are changed, requiring landowners to maintain rented homes, and holding dialogues between owners and renters to raise awareness of renters' issues among owners.

3. Systemic hostilities: Law Enforcement and ICE. In this part of the discussion, participants focused on two forms of hostility and safety that impact Emma residents' daily lives: a lack of appropriate and respectful responsiveness to crime in our community and raids by ICE (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement). In terms of crime, participants felt that robberies in our community are frequent, and when we report them, we (especially people of color) do not get the same attention, interest, and responsiveness from law enforcement, and more often than not the only tool that law enforcement uses are checkpoints, which in turn discourages residents from reporting crimes. In terms of ICE raids, these are a recurrent challenge that we face in our community. In 2018, around 30 people in western North Carolina were arrested in a week-long ICE raid that targeted community residents in our homes. In addition to deportations and family separations, the ICE raids lead to a great deal of personal and community trauma, even among families who are not directly affected by the raids. In terms of solutions, we focused on civic participation, policy advocacy and organizing.

## Next Steps

**Current goals and strategies.** Below we outline the highlights of PODER EMMA / Emma Community Ownership's current goals and strategies.

**Goal 1: Form a neighborhood based loan fund to support cooperatives and community ownership.**

**Goal 2: Create a Cooperative Network to create systems of technical and financial support, mutual support between cooperative members, and toolkits and resources to make sure that our cooperatives are successful.**

**Goal 3: Study the feasibility of the creation of a real estate cooperative to protect and develop properties in the best interest of neighborhood residents.**

**Goal 4: Preserve and share the unique history and character of the Emma community.**

**Goal 5: Seek partnerships, collaborations, pilot programs and the creation of a mobile home repair cooperative to improve mobile home quality and reduce vulnerability to breaking and entering.**

**Goal 6: Share the findings, goals and strategies in this report with organizations, agencies, local government, investors and developers so that decisions about our community are not made without our community's perspective.**

**Goal 7: The creation of an Emma Residents Council to carry out the vision and work so lovingly created by our neighborhood, including advocacy, civic engagement and policy creation to prevent the loss of mobile home parks, the creation of neighborhood infrastructure and assets, and building relationships between neighbors, small business owners and landlords in the Emma community.**

As we end this report, we begin the work of transforming our community. We will continue to refine the goals and strategies outlined above; we have come to see these goals as evolving and fluid. We believe that it is key to have a shared vision, plan and work in order to ensure that Emma's future is shaped by its residents, and not by the outside economic interests of others. Far too often we see advertisements selling properties in the Emma community that seek to "re-brand" the neighborhood as "up and coming" and "in close-proximity to downtown and the River Arts District", or as "a new West Asheville neighborhood." Emma is neither new nor in need or rebranding. Emma is a neighborhood with history, networks of trust and support, and a vision for its future.



## Resources

This section presents resources for people and communities that might want to learn more about the approaches we used and what we did.

### Popular education.

[www.populareducationconsultants.com](http://www.populareducationconsultants.com). (This is the website of Isabel Vinent Gramany and Reca Fernandez of Popular Education Consultants. In their toolkits section, they have good examples of ways to use popular education in planning and development efforts.)

Staples, L. (2016). *Roots to power: A manual for grassroots organizing* (3rd edition). Praeger Press, Santa Barbara, CA. (Isabel and Reca of Popular Education Consultants wrote a chapter on the theory and practice of both popular education and participatory action research.)

Freire, P. (2000). *A pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary edition). (This is the seminal book on the theory and practice of popular education.)

### Participatory action research.

Important resources include the following:

Staples, L. (2016). *Roots to power: A manual for grassroots organizing* (3rd edition). Praeger Press, Santa Barbara, CA. (Isabel and Reca of Popular Education Consultants wrote a chapter on the theory and practice of both popular education and participatory action research.)

McGarvey, C (2007). *Participatory action research: Involving all the players in evaluation and change*. Grantcraft, The Foundation Center. Retrieved from <http://www.grantcraft.org/assets/content/resources/par.pdf>. (This is written for funders, and it focuses on evaluation more than research, but it's a decent, non-jargony introduction to PAR).

Neighborhood plans that influenced our work. As mentioned above, we learned from and were influenced by the previous work of the Shiloh Community Association and the Burton Street Community Association, both grassroots groups in two of Asheville's historically African American neighborhoods. Their neighborhood plans are cited below:

Asheville Design Center, Western North Carolina Alliance, Burton Street Community Association (2010). *Burton Street community plan: A project of Blue Ridge Blueprints*. Retrieved from <http://ashevilledesigncenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Burton-Street-Plan.pdf>

Shiloh Community Association, Neighborhood Housing Services, the City of Asheville (2010). *Shiloh community plan 2025: Building on the legacy, embracing the future*. Retrieved from <https://www.ashevillehabitat.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Shiloh-Community-Plan-2025-compressed.pdf?x54407>

## Appendix A. Emma History: More Detail

In this appendix, we provide more detail about the history of the Emma community.

**Emma and Thomas Clayton.** The Emma community is named after Emma Clayton (1829-1887). Emma Clayton was born Emma Adelaide Smith; she married Thomas Clayton (1834-1905), who came from a prominent Western North Carolina family. Thomas's father, Ephraim Clayton (1804-1892), came from one of the early settler families of Western North Carolina. Ephraim's father, Lambert Clayton, was one of the justices who organized Buncombe County in 1792. Ephraim was one of Western NC's early builders, who was known to have built four courthouses, four churches, one hotel, two college buildings, a large bridge, and a large number of houses. Ephraim was also an important civic leader in Asheville. He was also a slave owner and a local leader in the Confederate Army's Civil War effort (e.g., he converted his factories to armaments production).

Emma and Thomas Clayton lived in what is now known as the Emma community. Their house adjoined a cemetery where the Clayton family is buried. The home was about a half a mile from the railroad station, towards the City of Asheville. It was a weatherboard house, and the lumber came from the trees on their plantation. After emancipation and freedom for enslaved people was declared, there was an enslaved man named Ike that stayed with the family, who is also buried in the cemetery there. They owned and operated a saw mill on Emma Creek. Thomas Clayton built a dam where Smith Mill Creek flowed in to Emma Creek, and logs for the saw mill were floated down the river from Henderson and Transylvania Counties. The workers would push the logs into Smith Mill Creek, which now runs under Patton Avenue in front of where Denny's restaurant used to be, and then up the creek to Emma Creek and into the sawmill. Dan McIntyre, whose grandfather Jacob Parham McIntyre used to work at the sawmill, says that "when the river is low you can go down to the Murphy Junction where the railroad cuts away from the Knoxville line to run westward to Murphy and see the remnants of the dam... you can see

the perfectly straight line of underwater rocks that runs across the river.”

Thomas Clayton also worked for the railroad, and was a leader in getting the railroad up from Morganton to Asheville and beyond. The railroad runs right through Emma community, and once the railroad was completed, there was a small station called Emma Station (named after Emma Clayton), a short stop on the railroad’s run further west.

Emma and Thomas are best known today for their series of letters to each other that has survived and is kept in the Wilson Special Collections Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Many of the letters were written while Thomas was fighting with the Confederate Army in the Civil War, particularly in the battles around Atlanta near the end of the war. Thomas’s mother, Nancy, wrote to him about fears of possible uprisings of enslaved people. Thomas wrote to Emma of the hardships and horror of war. Emma wrote to Thomas about the trials and tribulations of keeping up a home and raising their children alone.

Emma and Thomas’s daughters stayed in Emma after their parents’ death. They opened their home to visitors and ran a boarding house in the summer months. One of the Miller family cousins worked in the boarding house in the dining room. James Vester Miller’s sons also sold berries to the Clayton family and their boarding house. The Clayton daughters were known to be kind and generous neighbors according to the Miller family history and other long time Emma residents. Emma Clayton died at the age of 75, after living in Asheville her whole life.

**Emma Station:** The Western North Carolina Railroad and early history. As mentioned above, Thomas Clayton worked as a contractor for the Western North Carolina Railroad following the Civil War, and there was a station in our community called Emma Station (the first station after Asheville on a line headed out to Murphy, via Canton, Clyde, Waynesville, Sylva, Bryson City, and Nantahala). In many ways, the opening of the railroad to Asheville (in 1881) and further west was the spur for the original population boom in the Asheville area: indeed, Asheville’s population grew nearly 300%, from around 2,000 to around 10,000, from 1880 to 1890. It was the railroad that opened up our region to the eastern seaboard. The coming of the railroad was crucial for the early development of our community as well as for Asheville and Western NC as a whole.

This description below, from a 1912 travel guide, gives a sense of the railway during Asheville’s boom times.

The passage mentions Emma Station, as a suburb of Asheville.

*Located beautifully in the very heart of a plateau teeming with the richest of agricultural resources, the surrounding scenery is a constant delight to the eyes of the observer, but is without that rugged grandeur which characterizes the mountains in Swain, Jackson and Haywood Counties.*

*Swinging to the Northeast from Candler, the Railway successively touches the villages of Hominy, 8.7 miles from Asheville, Acton, 6 miles from Asheville, Sulphur Springs, 5.3 miles from Asheville, and Emma, 2.2 miles from Asheville, all of which are residential suburbs of the western North Carolina metropolis.*

*Just beyond the little station of Emma, the Railway effects a junction with the Knoxville Division of the Southern Railway, crosses the French Broad River and over that division enters the station at Asheville.*

The Buttrick Family and the McClland family were other early Emma families, who were both English. They were both considered wealthy. Mr. McClland owned the grocery store, where the US Post Office was housed. The Buttricks lived on a hill above the store.

**Building the railroad:** The unpaid labor of African American slaves and prisoners. The early stages of the railroad, particularly the dangerous route from Old Fort up the mountain to Asheville, were built primarily with slave labor. As one example, in the 1850s, James W. Patton was one of the largest slave-owners in Asheville. Patton Avenue, which was named after James’s father, is the largest road in Emma, marking one of the boundaries of our community. In 1861, Patton had 400 people, many of whom were enslaved people, working for him as he contracted to build the railway line between Old Fort and Asheville, including the challenging Swannanoa Tunnel.

Soon after this, the Civil War disrupted construction of the railway. When the line was finished in the 1870s, the labor came not from enslaved people, but from the unpaid labor of people who had been incarcerated – and again, most of these prisoners were African American. Following the Emancipation Proclamation, most Southern states quickly passed laws called “black codes” to control and oppress African Americans. As one example, vagrancy laws made it illegal to be unemployed, and these laws selectively targeted African Americans. Unemployed African Americans were convicted, imprisoned, and then contracted out for work, usually for no pay. Laws focused on “mischief” and “insulting gestures” similarly targeted African

Americans; thus African Americans who stood up for their rights were arrested as aggressive, imprisoned, and contracted out for work for no pay. Across the South, African Americans were imprisoned arbitrarily and sent to work camps where they were forced to work in appalling, unhealthy conditions for no pay. Death rates were shockingly high, because unlike slave owners, the private contractors had no self-interest in the health and well-being of their unpaid African American workers. The work was relentless; workers were regularly whipped with long horse-whips; workers who suffered injuries were left to die.

Thus the railway, which was the catalyst for the Asheville area’s huge population and economic boom, was built primarily with the unpaid labor of Western North Carolina’s African American population. It was the railway that first brought growth and prosperity to Western North Carolina, to Asheville, to Emma Station, and to our community. It was the unpaid labor of our region’s African Americans that brought Asheville the railway.

**Emma’s early African American history: James and Violet Agnes Miller and the Violet Hill Cemetery.** The Emma community is working to honor and preserve its African American history. One example is the life and work of James Vester Miller (1860-1940), who was born in Rutherford County to an enslaved mother. After Emancipation, his mother moved to Asheville with her three children. James started working in the building trades. Despite his lack of access to formal education, he had a natural aptitude, and soon he was apprenticed to the best brick masons in Asheville. He continued to excel, and by the turn of the century he opened his own company, Miller and Sons, which eventually became one of Asheville’s largest. In the boom times of the early 1900s, Miller’s company built many of Asheville’s still-standing brick buildings, including the Municipal Building (which still houses our police and fire departments), a post office, a federal building, and offices for the Telephone and Telegraph Company. He is best remembered today, though, for his lovely churches, including St. Matthias Episcopal (home to Asheville’s first African American congregation, where Miller was an officer), Hopkins Chapel, Mount Zion Missionary Baptist, and St. James AME.

James Miller lived near Emma Station with his wife, Violet Agnes Miller (1864-1936). Violet was an African American woman from South Carolina; she moved to Asheville to work in her aunt’s laundry business. She had to leave school in the 3rd grade to work as a laundress, but she still taught her husband how

to read and write. Their first home was located in Asheville on Beaumont Street, where their children were born. Later, James decided to build a home in the country, in Emma. He built a beautiful 15-room brick house in Emma Station, believed to have been on what is now Gatewood Rd. Their home was known as “Out Home”, and was an important gathering place for family and community. It had a beautiful front yard, well, milk house, chicken house, spring house for cooling and freezing, barn, gardens, apple orchards, horses, chickens, hogs, mules and cows. There was also an 8 room house in the back that the Miller family rented to others. One of the first telephones in Emma Stations was installed in “Out Home”, and it was a hand cranked party line. The Miller family remembers how James Vester Miller, known as “Pa” by the family, would buy old fashioned candies every Saturday night at the Emma Station grocery, and share them with the children on Sundays when the entire family gathered. James and Violet lived at Out Home with James’ brother, Lee, and his wife Euhlahlia. Lee had worked in the steel mills in Pittsburgh, and Eulahlia taught at the Hill Street School, and also owned a store on Montford Avenue.

The Miller family had a relationship with the Clayton daughters, and recalls in their memoirs how the Miller grandchildren would sell berries to the Clayton family, and felt very warmly towards Emma Clayton. They also spent many hours visiting Ike, who was called Uncle Ike, and had been enslaved by the Clayton family and continued to live with them until his death. The Miller boys would visit Ike to listen to stories of slavery. Ike died after illness at around 100 years of age, and his tombstone says, “Our Beloved Uncle Ike.”

They raised six boys in the Emma community; five of them joined Miller and Sons builders and became master brick masons like their father, while one of them went to medical school at Boston University and became one of Asheville’s first African American doctors. They were active in Asheville’s African American community, in church life and in the Emma community.

The Miller family killed 8-10 hogs a year, both for family use and for their neighbors. There were “bar rooms” in Emma, which were whiskey stores, and the by product from the whiskey was used to feed the pigs. The Miller family not only shared meat with neighbors, but also shared kraut, corn meal, corn bread, jelly, grape juice and wine, butter and milk. The corn meal was ground at the old water mill in Emma. The Miller family canned strawberries, dewberries, blackberries, huckleberries, cherries, pickled watermelon rinds, and vegetables. Over 300 to 350 jars were canned each winter.

Another important Miller family contribution was the creation of an African American cemetery, Violet Hill Cemetery, on Hazel Mill Road in the Emma community. This cemetery has been important for Asheville's African American communities for years; for instance, current African American residents of the Burton Street community describe how the building of I-240 through downtown Asheville cut them off from the Emma community, Violet Hill Cemetery, and a piece of their heritage and culture. In sum, Emma's African American roots run deep, in many different ways, at many levels.

**The Bingham School, 1891-1928.** The period from 1890 to 1930 was Asheville's first boom period. It all ended with the Great Depression, but from the coming of the railway in 1880 to the depths of the Depression in 1930, Asheville grew rapidly. During this period, from 1891 to 1928, the Emma community was home to a Bingham School, an elite classical education institution that was part of a private school system stretching across North Carolina. The Bingham Schools were founded in 1793 in Wilmington by Presbyterian minister William Bingham. Bingham was raised in Ireland and educated in Scotland, and he wanted to bring a rigorous classical (e.g., Latin and Greek) education to North Carolina. His sons continued to develop schools, starting new ones in Hillsborough (1827) and Mebane (1864). It was the grandson of William Bingham, Robert Bingham, who opened the Bingham School in the Emma community. It was a large school, on 250 acres, and the first in the South to have a gymnasium and swimming pool specifically for school use. The school had a national and international reputation; students came from all over the country, and all over the world. The school was located at Bingham and Pearson Bridge Roads, roughly where Buncombe County Schools Central Office is today.

**The Emma Burglars.** An unknown white man who called himself Frank Johnson, and Ben Foster, a black man from the local community, were ordered to be hung after attempting a robbery at the Emma Post Office. The night before their hanging, Ben Foster's mother and sister visited him in the jail. Frank Johnson's family was not notified, because she refused to give his real name, so as to save his family from the shame and grief. Frank Johnson said, "I had a good trade, but couldn't keep at it, wanted to roam around, my roving is over now." The Sheriff was in charge of the hangings, and people came from miles around to form a crowd of 2,000 to 3,000 people. Ben Foster asked the crowd to sing, "Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior," with him as he awaited to be hung, and then sang "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand" on the hanging platform. The men had planned to carry out the robbery without

harming anyone, but they were surprised by a boy working at the store. They were both buried in poor people's graves at Riverside Cemetery.

**Emma International Airport: Barnstormers and drag racers.** A fascinating part of Emma community's history is our airport, called Josephson Airfield, Emma Airport, Asheville Airpark, and, lovingly by locals, Emma International Airport. It's not clear when the airport began. It started as some open pastureland that Joe Josephson (a gumball machine supplier) rented for keeping some cows. Mr. Josephson built a runway in the pasture, and in the early days it was little more than a flat dirt-and-grass strip in a pasture – hence its first name, Josephson Airfield. The airfield was located right in the middle of our community, off Westside Drive, near Hazel Mill Road and Louisiana Avenue. As airplanes became more common, the airfield became more established, and it became known as Emma Airport. Although there is not firm documentation of this, local stories tell that in 1928, a Ford airplane attempting to fly from Michigan to Miami (the first long-distance flight in a Ford plane) landed at Emma Airfield.

There is clear documentation of Emma Airfield starting in the 1940s. By this time, it had become a small airport, with 10 covered hangars, a fuel pump, and a little "terminal" building up on the hill, with snacks and beer and pinball machines. While it was used as a conventional airfield, it was also home to many airshows, which were popular at the time. Local residents would park 50-60 cars in pastures nearby, and people would come from all over Asheville to watch the airshows – barnstormers, stunt flyers, racers, and parachutists. In the 1950s, when airshows declined in popularity, the runway of the Emma Airport became a local center for drag racing. Saturday nights at the Emma Airport drag races were a big outing for folks in Asheville throughout the 50s. The airport functioned, in a limited way, throughout the 1960s and 70s; it was finally closed in 1982. You can still see the old hangar today, just off of Westside Drive.

#### **Local businesses, entrepreneurship and community economics**

Fisher's Floor Covering, Walker Tire and Moss Body Shop were followed by Ramsey's Mobile Home Parts Store as some of the businesses that reflect the Emma community's character and residents. During the early days of these businesses, the heart of Emma was used as a grazing area for goats, and Emma was mainly rural and undeveloped. Then, the mobile home parks began development in the early 1980s, creating affordable for working class families. The Moss family developed

several of the mobile home parks as well as commercial properties in Emma, which are the backbone to much of Emma's affordable housing and small business infrastructure. The Emma Community would not be what it is today if it were not for the Moss family's contributions. In the 1990s and 2000s many immigrant families from all over the world, but mainly Mexico and Central America, moved into the neighborhood, many opening small businesses in Emma, including grocery stores providing fresh fruits and vegetables, taquerias, hair salons, and more.

In 2003, when the Emma Bucks community currency program which was started by Children First was still running, Emma had the highest rate per capita of poverty in the county, and was the most ethnically diverse neighborhood. The program was designed to break the myths around impoverished communities, and work with the incredible community assets and skills that existed. It allowed residents to exchange talents such as providing haircuts, tune ups, appliance repair, and babysitting, and worked as a modern day bartering system.

The Emma United Methodist Church also did important community economics work in the neighborhood. The Emma United Methodist Church Women sold crafts and baked goods at their community bazaars, starting in 1982 and well into the 1990s. They sold every year at the annual Spring Bazaar in the Asheville Mall, where they won several blue ribbons. Some of the women's specialties were crocheting, knitting, and creating dolls with mops, and they raised thousands of dollars at each bazaar.

Emma also has a history of industrial facilities and jobs, including the Care-Free Windows plant and the National Wiper Alliance, among several others. The Care-Free Windows Plant (also called Reliant Building Products,) was known as the crown jewel plant of the company due to its efficiency in operation. In 2000, the plant grew from 105 to 133 workers, but only paid \$7.25 to \$8 an hour to start, while average Buncombe County manufacturing production workers started at \$11.71. The plant built windows for new home construction and mobile homes. Despite the fact that the jobs were not as high paying as others in the region, when these plants closed, the loss of employment opportunities had a real impact on the neighborhood.

**Contamination and pollution: The Square-D plant on Bingham Road.** In 1990, Emma community members discovered that their groundwater and wells had been polluted by manufacturing businesses on Bingham Road, right near where Bingham School used to be (and

where Buncombe County Schools Central Offices are today). The manufacturing site was started in 1952 by Gorham Manufacturing Company; in 1960 it was sold to the Square D Company. Square D operated the plant from 1960 to 2005, continuing to operate as Square D was bought out by Schneider Electric. Historically, Square D is best known for manufacturing circuit breakers and energy management systems. Square D started in Detroit, but by the time it was purchased by Schneider Electric in 1991, it had operations in 23 countries. While Square D provided jobs in our community, the corporation also polluted and contaminated our land.

In 1990, The NC Division of Water Quality's Aquifer Protection Section discovered that there had been groundwater contamination at the Square D site. State government agencies have monitored the contamination since then. A more recent concern at the Square D site has been vapor intrusion, which is when harmful vapors from groundwater contamination are found in a building. In 2012, the NC Department of Natural Resources requested that Square D / Schneider Electric conduct further groundwater contamination assessments, and further assess indoor air contamination levels. In the 2012 assessment, the DENR found that harmful levels of vapor intrusion were not present. DENR continues to monitor the Square D site.

In short, like many small rural communities across the US, Emma has experienced pollution and contamination from multinational corporations that are not based in our community. Many of our homes are right next to the Square D site. Indeed, our community's newest school, Nesbitt Discovery Academy (a STEM school), is adjacent to the Square D site. While the site has been tested, a 2013 report by the Center for Public Environmental Oversight (a national organization that educates people on the process and technologies for cleanup and environmental protection) warned that the testing has been too limited to prove that the groundwater contamination and the threat of vapor intrusion are not harming community members or our children. It's unsettling, to say the least, that so many of us live next to a site that has generated so much pollution, and we do not have clarity yet on the degree to which that pollution is harming our health.

#### **Emma community: A living history.**

Much of the information in this history was learned by spending time in the NC Library Room at Pack Place Public Library. Other parts of this history were learned by talking to long time neighborhood residents. We

also learned beautiful stories and history by reading the Miller Family History, which was documented by Barbara, Dr. Lee Otus Miller's daughter, based on her conversations with her Aunt Annie Mae, who was James Vester Miller's only daughter, and shared with us by James Vester Miller's grand daughter, Andrea Clark. Andrea Clark is now working on the James Vester Miller Historic Trail.

We also want to recognize that we have not been able to learn about the specific history of Native American people and their relationship to land and place in the Emma Community. We will continue to work to learn this history that is so important to the place we now call home.

We know that we have much more listening and learning to do, and we encourage those in our community that hold pieces of this history to share



this with us to add to our community wealth and knowledge. Our generation as well as our children's generation must understand where we come from in order to create the path of where we are going.

*"There are heartaches associated with each family in this history. Heartbreak is as much a part of life and history as joy and happiness... Suffering, unhappiness, disappointment and violence all play a part in the development of any history, whether it be that of family or country... Every event which occurs in each family is a part of our history."*

#### Miller Family History

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**Appendix B: The Community Survey (English Version)1.**

**Emma Community Ownership – PODER Emma**

Name of researcher

Date

Location

Duration

<b>1. Neighborhood</b>	How long have you lived in Emma?
<b>2. Housing</b>	Mobile home Apartment House Homeless Other
<b>3. Housing status</b>	Which of the following describes your housing? I rent I own I own my trailer and and rent the lot Other
<b>4. *This question is for anyone that pays rent, whether that be for a house, apartment, mobile home, or lot rent</b>	If you pay rent, how much do you pay per month? Has your rent gone up in the past five years? Yes    No If yes, how much has it gone up? From \$            to \$
<b>5. Identity</b>	How old are you?

<b>6. Identity</b>	We know that not everyone identifies with different words about race and identity. We also want to be sure that we talk to people of different backgrounds in our neighborhood to make sure that the report reflects diverse experiences. Please share which of the following describe your identity (you can name as many as you identify with!)  Black / African American  Latino / Hispanic  White  Native American  Indigenous  Multiracial  Immigrant            If so, from what country?  Other _____
<b>7. Language</b>	What languages and dialects do you or your family speak?

**Quantitative Data (Choose no more than 3 answers.)**

**8. Why did you move to Emma?**

- a. I had family in the neighborhood
- b. It's a convenient location
- c. There was affordable rental housing
- d. I had the opportunity to purchase a home
- e. I wanted my children to go to Emma Elementary
- f. Others in the neighborhood speak my language
- g. Sense of community
- h. Other \_\_\_\_\_

**9. Why do you continue living in Emma?**

- a. I have family in the neighborhood
- b. It's a convenient location
- c. I pay affordable rent
- d. I own my home
- e. I want my children to study in the neighborhood schools

- f. Others in the neighborhood speak my language
- g. Sense of community
- h. Other \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Do you fear that any of the following could push you out of Emma?**

- a. Increasing cost of rent
- b. Increase cost of property taxes
- c. Higher income people and businesses moving into the neighborhood
- d. Eviction
- e. Police / Immigration Policies and Enforcement
- f. Other \_\_\_\_\_
- g. None of the above, I do not feel at risk for being pushed out of Emma.

**The following two questions are only for mobile home residents.**

11.37% of families in Emma live in mobile homes. For many years local government and developers considered mobile homes as not worth protecting and preserving, and we have seen mobile home parks replaced with more expensive housing. Emma Community Ownership is working to change stereotypes about mobile homes because we know that mobile homes are an important option for our families.

In your experience, what are the benefits and positive things about living in a mobile home or mobile home park?

12. From your perspective, what are the challenges or problems about living in your mobile home? What are the challenges about living in the mobile home park that you live in?

**Qualitative – Open Ended Questions for everyone**

13. What improvements need to be made in the neighborhood to make you and your family's life better?

14. What makes the Emma neighborhood special? What is different about Emma than other neighborhoods?

15. At the end of this research we will be sharing the outcomes with local government and organizations that work with and serve our community so that they can better understand the strengths, needs and dreams of our neighborhood. Is there anything else about your experiences living in Emma that you would like to share to be added to our report?

Researcher observations/Notes:

**Appendix C. The Community Survey: Visual Response Guides**

We developed these visual response guides for some of our survey questions to make the survey accessible to people with all levels of literacy.

