

Welcome to the East Side of Buffalo!

When the Buffalo Together Community Response Fund formed, it chose to use only “East Buffalo.”¹ However, after engaging with community members through the community investment planning process, facilitated by Rainbow Research, the Steering Committee has now determined that, from now on, it will honor the community’s prideful self-identification as the “East Side.” All communication from May 14, 2023, forward will refer to work of BTCRF as work by-for-on the “East Side.”

Why and how does the language or names we use to describe things matter? The East Side became the East Side from two twisted angles. It was called the East Side to designate it as that place “where the Blacks live” by whites. It was called the East Side by Blacks who called the region home, as the place where they could be themselves, honor their culture and live more free of the insults regularly received when they stepped off the East Side.

In 1968 the Kerner Commission issued a report, which called out that we were becoming a separate and unequal nation – one Black and one white. The construction of “The East Side” is a manifestation of the structuring of racial inequality from 1619 to the present in the United States. The celebration of the East Side as the place where Blacks have consistently “made a way out of no way,” and consistently worked “twice as hard to get half as much.” Through the work of the Buffalo Together Community Response Fund, we intend to not just change the narrative, but to change history.

We can commit to mutual prosperity without erasing the complexity of two intertwined narratives that shaped the history of Buffalo and its East Side: a) the history of Black life and livelihood and how it shaped Buffalo and sustains a celebrated presence on the East Side; and b) how Buffalo, the region and the nation allowed structural racism to negatively define the East Side up to now, and how we commit to moving forward in a way that mutually honors the cultural heritage and history of the East Side by investing in it, and invests in racial equity strategies, so that being on the East Side no longer means being structured on the marginalized side of Buffalo.

At a recent community dialogue of the Buffalo Together Community Response Fund and Rainbow Research, one community member put it out there in such a straightforward and compelling way. He said² “to call the East Side ‘East Buffalo’ is to change the name without changing the game that made the East Side, the negative connotation of the East Side. It’s like re-writing history by whitewashing.”

So, we will honor what the community calls itself – the East Side. Further, we will support the quest of residents to clarify the history of the East Side, contextualized by

¹ Why? BTCRF chose to use language to counter the white supremacist use of “East Side” – a place where blacks live in segregation and are more vulnerable to attack. In a quest for equal respect for all regions of Buffalo, why should the East and West be “sided” as a form of violent othering, when the North and South do not have to be “sided”?

² Paraphrasing the exact verbiage here – comment was made by George Johnson, life-long Eastsider.

the interplay of structural racism and a community's quest for self-determination, respect and power. Buffalo is lucky it has an East Side that won't disappear. The structurally racist marginalization and exploitation of the East Side will be dismantled, but the historical culture and pride of the East Side will grow richer and stronger as a catalyst for Buffalo's better future – one free of white supremacist violence and structural racism embedded at the political economy's core, and one full of intercultural harmony, anti-racist norms, and common prosperity.

So, welcome to the East Side! This is a community historically celebrated as the final stop on the Underground Railroad, and a place significantly formed by Blacks who chose to make this area home. Now, working above ground, the Black community of the East Side is shaping a path for itself and all of Buffalo that helps us all become, truly, the good neighbors of the neighborly city we claim to be.

By using "East Buffalo" in the past, the BTCRF influenced others who have followed suit. Now, as the BTCRF pivots to using "East Side" exclusively, we encourage our funders, investors, allies, and friends in the region to be intentional as you consider whether to follow our example or not – to consider your relationship with the community, with the work, and determine whether East Side or East Buffalo are more appropriate for you. It is your choice.

What is not open for negotiation is the future of the East Side and Buffalo – we will no longer be divided by race. We will be unified by an equitable regional culture of neighborliness and common prosperity. We will honor the East Side as the heart of Legacy Black Culture and Life within the region. We commit that whether you live North, South, West or East in Buffalo, Black life and livelihood will, forever more, be respected and supported equitably with life and livelihood opportunities for all Buffalonians, regardless of where we live, worship, work, or play.