

RPEC NEWS

The newsletter of the Richmond Peace Education Center

July-August 2013



Weekend at this Blue Ridge home is one of many choices for RPEC auction bidders.

Amazing!
Gorgeous!
Spectacular!

These superlatives describe a beautiful Alpine home in the Blue Ridge Mountains that could be yours for a three-night weekend stay if you should cast a winning bid in the Richmond Peace Education Center's 2013 Auction and Dinner on Saturday, Nov. 9.

The four-bedroom, four-bathroom home has soaring ceilings, magnificent views, and a prime location in Wintergreen, as described by a previous party that visited there:

"The home is gorgeous, the views are spectacular, the hot tub is great; we loved the kitchen. . . It is a five-minute walk from the Black Bear Café, which was great for morning lattes and snacks. There is so much to

Continued on Page 3

Sequester Knife Slashes Safety Net

Blind Budget Cuts are an excuse to cut programs benefiting Virginians and to increase spending for preparing for war

By Jennifer Garvin-Sanchez

When Congress passed the Budget Control Act of 2011, everyone agreed that blind, across the board cuts were such a bad idea that Republicans and Democrats would have to meet across the aisle to agree on a Federal Budget that did not exceed the new debt ceiling. The Act mandated across the board budget cuts if Congress failed to produce a deficit reduction bill with at least \$1.2 trillion in cuts. If it failed, then Congress could grant a

\$1.2 trillion increase in the debt ceiling but this would trigger across-the-board cuts ("sequestrations"), as of January 2, 2013.

However, the House and Senate just cannot seem to agree on a vision for a just distribution of our economic goods. The House Appropriations Committee divided up \$967 billion in funding. While the mandated sequestration does call for this total, the House did not seem to care

Continued on Page 6

El-Amin disputes McDonnell on Felon Voting

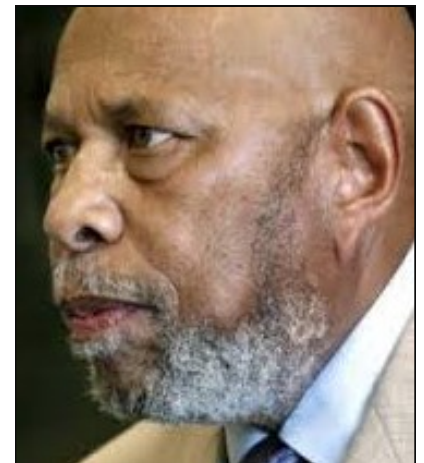
By Charles Robideau

What motivated Gov. Bob McDonnell's initiative to restore voting rights to ex-felons?

In the view of Sa'ad El-Amin, the Governor wanted to upstage El-Amin's Federal Court lawsuit seeking the same end.

El-Amin filed his lawsuit last July 24, naming as defendants the Commonwealth of Virginia, Gov. McDonnell, Commonwealth Secretary Janet Vestal Kelly, and Richmond Registrar J. Kirk De Courcey Showalter.

El-Amin, a former Richmond City Council member, is one of some 350,000 Virginians who have lost their voting rights as ex-felons



Sa'ad El-Amin

– El-Amin because of his conviction and three-year imprisonment for tax evasion. El-Amin's suit asks the court

Continued on Page 8

RPECNEWS

is a publication of the
Richmond Peace Education Center
3500 Patterson Avenue
Richmond, VA 23221
Phone: (804) 232-1002
E-mail: rpec@rpec.org

RPEC Web Page:
<http://www.rpec.org>

<http://www.facebook.com/rpec.org>

RPEC Staff

Executive Director: Adria Scharf
Asst. to the Director:
Paul Fleisher
Conflict Resolution Coordinator:
Santa Sorenson
Office Manager: Johnnie J. Taylor
Administrative Assistant: Dana Snead

2013 Board of Directors

Chair: Zandra Rawlinson
Vice-chair: Charol Shakeshaft
Treasurer: Gordon Davies
Secretary: Lucretia McCulley
Maryam Ansari
Dwayne Bennett
Kenneth Dance
Jennifer Garvin-Sanchez
Renee Hill
Ellie Meleski
Valaryee Mitchell
Tony Scott
Michael Stone
Amy Woo
Elizabeth Wong

Newsletter Committee

Editor: Charles Robideau
ccrobideau@gmail.net
John Gallini
Grant Rissler
Adria Scharf
John Williamson
Jennifer Garvin-Sanchez
Thad Williamson

Opinions and announcements in RPECnews are those of the individual writers and are not necessarily endorsed by RPEC.

RPECnews is published 6 times per year and has a circulation of approximately 1,800. We welcome article and calendar submissions.

Reflection

Adria Scharf
Director, Richmond Peace Education Center

Press Our Senators on Budget Cuts

RPEC is collecting signatures on a letter to Virginia Senators John Warner and Tim Kaine. The letter is prompted by our observation that sequestration and other federal budget cuts are disproportionately hurting the poor and vulnerable in our community. (For more on the impact of sequestration on social programs in the state of Virginia, see the Page One article, "Sequester Knife Slashes Safety Net") The letter to the Senators reads:

"The current system of tax expenditures — through loopholes, credits, deductions and other benefits — disproportionately favors the wealthy. The numerous tax exemptions in the tax code are also exorbitantly expensive, costing about \$1.1 trillion a year. We urge you to support positive tax reform which increases taxes on the wealthy while protecting refundable tax credits for low-income earners. . . .

"The Pentagon budget, which has grown by about 50 percent in real terms in the last decade, is still projected to be higher ten years from now than it was during most of the Cold War and the Vietnam War. Our nation needs to find more savings in that area while also ensuring that we have appropriate transition assistance for communities that may be impacted by these changes."

The letter urges both Senators to work actively, as they participate in Senate budget deliberations, to protect human needs and social safety net programs from cuts; raise revenues without harming low-income earners or the progressivity of the tax code; find Pentagon savings of at least \$1 trillion over ten years; reinvest in programs to assist communities in transition and to build new economic opportunities.

We will be sending a delegation to meet with the Senators or their high level staff later in the summer to present the letter and the list of endorsers.

We call on all RPEC members and supporters to sign the letter today. Individuals may endorse it on our website, <http://www.rpec.org/letter-to-senators-warner-and-kaine>.

We also encourage organizations — churches, synagogues, mosques, and agencies affected by budget cuts — to endorse.

We are collecting hard-copy letters on letterhead from organizational endorsers. Many groups, including the Virginia Council of Churches, Housing Opportunities Made Equal, Virginia Organizing, and First Unitarian Universalist Church of Richmond, have already endorsed. Groups are welcome to print the letter on their own stationery, and mail them to the office. Contact rpec@rpec.org if you have a letter for us, or need more information. Please sign on!

Continued on Page 6

RPEC happenings

RPEC Auction and Dinner Nov. 9

Continued from Page 1

do nearby, including an amazing hike (Crabtree Falls) as well as horseback riding. . .”

The Wintergreen home is just one of many great items that have been donated for this year's auction, which will be held at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, 555 E. Canal Street, in downtown Richmond.

The Crowne Plaza is a new location that will accommodate more participants for this growing community event. The auction will also begin at a new earlier time, 5:30 p.m.

This year's event will feature a cocktail hour, jazz music, and a sit-down, buffet-style dinner served at tables that seat up to eight persons. The silent and live auctions will boast a lot of new and exciting items for bidding. (See more below!)

Tickets for this year's auction and dinner are priced at \$40 each. Guests are invited to gather a group of friends and buy a full table for \$320. Community members who are unable to attend but want to help make the auction a success and help RPEC strengthen its programming, are invited to buy one or more tickets. Order your tickets now! E-mail us at tickets@rpec.org or call the office at (804) 232-1002.

Here is a small sampling of some of the other items that we have already confirmed our auction guests will have an opportunity to purchase.

A Day on the Water for Four.* Sail the 34-foot Endora sloop. Learn to sail with the experienced captain, or just sit back and enjoy a day on the water. Lunch provided.

Vacation Weekend at Luminhaus.* Three nights in the Shenandoah Valley, located within sight of Signal Knob at the northern end of the Massanutten mountain range. One bedroom.

Dalai Lama Package.* A special basket of items purchased in Dharamsala, India, home of the Dalai Lama and his refugee community.

Thai Dinner for Four,* prepared by former residents of Thailand. . . or a Nasi Tumpeng **Indonesian Dinner for Four.*** . . . or an **Italian Dinner for Four.**

*New this year!

That's just a small sampling of the items that the community has donated already. There will be much, much more. Check the RPEC website beginning on August 12 for a complete list of items.

The Peace Center is currently accepting donations of personal services, gift certificates to restaurants and other local businesses, hand-crafted items, special services, vacation homes, and other items that might generate enthusiastic bidding.

Please contact us at rpec@rpec.org or 232-1002 to make a contribution. We will be accepting items for donation up until September 30. Please let us know if you have an item to donate! Because we are a 501c-3 nonprofit organization, most donations receive a tax credit.

RPEC friends, don't miss the auction fun this year. Be sure to

purchase your tickets early. The last two years we saw such strong interest that we had to close ticket sales more than a week before the event, because we had filled to capacity. Coming to the auction is a great way to show your support for the Peace Center while enjoying yourself. We look forward to seeing you on Nov. 9.

Interfaith Peace Festival Marking Its Ninth Year

Don't miss this year's RVA Peace Festival. It will take place at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church (6000 Grove Avenue) on Saturday, Sept. 28, from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

This interfaith celebration features multi-cultural arts and crafts, food, exhibits, and activities and crafts for children.

The Family Peace Festival was first held in response to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Now renamed the RVA Peace Festival, its mission is the same: to bring together youth and adults to celebrate peace and diversity and to build community and understanding in the Richmond area.

Mark your calendar now for this inspiring community celebration..

Vendor and exhibitor space is available at the early-bird rate of \$25 for nonprofits, \$50 for profits.

For more information contact the Interfaith Council of Greater Richmond at info@familypeace-festival.org or 804-909-7860.

RVA Peace Festival sponsors include the Interfaith Council of Greater Richmond, Richmond Peace Education Center, and the Center for Interfaith Reconciliation.

The festival will be held rain or shine. See you there!

Richmond Youth Peace Project Offers Leadership Training

Teens...

- **Learn to settle conflicts nonviolently**
- **Develop your leadership skills**
- **Help reduce the level of violence in your school and community**
- **Earn community service hours**
- **Meet dedicated teens from throughout the Richmond region**

The Richmond Youth Peace Project is seeking applicants for a FREE Conflict Resolution Workshop for Teen Trainers — grade 8 through age 20. The workshop is scheduled for Saturday and Sunday, September 21 and 22, 9:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. each day. It will be held at the Fan Free Clinic, 1010 N. Thompson St.

Young people are invited to apply for our eighth annual two-day conflict resolution workshop for teens. The program will introduce teens to conflict resolution techniques to use in their own life, and to share with others. Participants will learn to plan and lead workshops for schools and youth groups.

The training is FREE. Lunch and snacks will be provided. Participants also earn community service credit by participating, and also receive a training manual. Financial support is provided by the Youth Philanthropy Project and the members of RPEC.

Teens who successfully complete the workshop will be invited to become RYPP conflict resolution trainers. With guidance and supervision from experienced adults, they will promote, plan and present conflict resolution workshops for children and teens during the coming year.

Space in this program is limited. To apply, complete the short application form available at www.rpec.org, or email rypp@rpec.org.

Conflict Resolution Workshops

We have completed workshops with the Armstrong Leadership Program, RPEC's Conflict Resolution Training for Trainers, Encampment Leadership Training, Camp Diva, and the VCU Global Education Workshop series working with Iraqi college exchange students.

Upcoming workshops are HROC (Healing and Restoring Our Communities) training for trainers 2, Virginia Department of Social Services Conference on Domestic Violence and two HROC introductory workshops at the VCU Conference on Women, War, and Peace in Africa. We will begin another HROC series in the fall.

RPEC Night at Mosaic Restaurant

Mark your calendar now for August 28 and join us at the Mosaic Restaurant for some good food, meeting friends and best of all – supporting the work of RPEC!

Mosaic Restaurant at 6229A River Road has selected RPEC to receive a portion of its receipts on August 28 as part of its “Community Give Back” program. Mosaic is open from 5 – 9 p.m. and offers good food in comfortable indoor and outdoor dining spaces. Board members will be there to greet you and answer any questions you may have about RPEC.

Please remember to tell the hostess you have come in support of RPEC. That will ensure that 13 percent of pre-tax receipts will be given to support the Peace Center.

Combined Campaigns Kick-Off

Does your workplace participate in the Combined Campaigns? Fall campaigns start in September. This is a simple way to support RPEC and get a tax benefit. All it takes is a simple check in a box for you to make a payroll contribution to RPEC!

RPEC's campaign codes are:

Local Government and Schools (LG&S): **#140**

Commonwealth of Virginia Campaign (CVC): **#3751**

United Way: **#3181**

Please specify both the code and “Richmond Peace Education Center.”

You decide how much. Donations of any size really add up and make a difference for RPEC. We thank you for doing your part.

Shop Thrifty Quaker in September

Clean out those closets! In September, all sales at The Thrifty Quaker will benefit the Richmond Peace Education Center. Please set aside any giveaways and donate them to The Thrifty Quaker in very late August or early in September. The Thrifty Quaker welcomes donations of furniture, household items, working appliances, kitchenware, books, shirts, clothing, candles, and much, much more. When you donate, they provide a tax receipt.

The Thrifty Quaker is a thrift store operated by Midlothian Friends Meeting located at 13567 Midlothian Turnpike. RPEC depends on proceeds from Thrifty Quaker to fund a portion of our peace and justice programming. Thanks for your help.

Note: If you have something to donate, but do not have transportation or are not able to deliver it, please contact the RPEC office.



SEPTEMBER 20 – 21, 2013 at VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

Women, War, and Peace is a conference being organized by Virginia Commonwealth University, Virginia Friends of Mali, Richmond Peace Education Center, and the Richmond Sister Cities Commission, in partnership with MERLOT African Network, West Africa Research Association, and the Virginia Consortium of Social Studies Specialists and College Educators (VCSSE).

Over the course of two days, we will highlight women's roles in war and peace in West Africa and North Africa through films, research presentations, and panel discussions. The conference highlights Virginia's links to West Africa, while developing and nurturing collaboration between schools, universities and community groups.

CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS

Keynote address: Abigail Disney, Producer of the PBS Series, Women, War, and Peace

Mme Zakiyatou oualet Haletine: co-Founder of the MusoKunda, Mali's Museum of Womanhood in Bamako & **Dr Ibrahim ag Youssouf:** was involved in drafting and negotiating Mali peace agreements with the Tauregs, in designing and implementing the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration process for former rebels, and in creating the Flame of Peace

Saturday Keynote address: Son Excellence Monsieur Almaamoun Baba Lamine KEITA *Ambassador of Mali in Washington*

Film Panels will discuss important themes and implications from documentaries and feature length movies.

Research Panels will present cutting edge research by scholars and practitioners.

Workshops will engage practitioners and community members to enhance skills relating to peace-making, K-12 education, and online learning and teaching using the MERLOT African Network.

Conference Proceedings and outstanding submitted work may be offered for publication by the African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review (Indiana University Press & West African Research Association) and *Auctus* (Virginia Commonwealth University)

TO LEARN MORE

VISIT <http://www.vcupeace.net/> or EMAIL peace@vcu.edu

Press Our Senators

Continued from Page 2

In our communications with the Senators, we will urge them to be proactive about assisting communities dependent on military spending to transition to other forms of economic activity.

Virginia would do well to pass legislation similar to a bill recently introduced in the Connecticut state legislature. That Connecticut bill would activate a commission to develop a strategy for increasing the number of manufacturing jobs in that state in such a way that diversifies or converts defense-related industries to other nonmilitary products, emphasizing environmentally sustainable and civilian manufacturing.

This sort of proactive and forward-looking approach to our over-reliance on defense-sector jobs is exactly what is needed by our state and the nation as we transition to an economy freer from war spending, but do so in a way that protects working people and communities.

Sequester Slashes Safety Net

Continued from Page 1

that the Act called for cuts in both war **and** domestic spending. The House committee approved \$512.5 billion for defense, or about \$15 billion **more** than the deficit reduction law allows in FY 2014. The House committee also **cuts** \$20.6 billion more than the law calls for in all the other programs subject to the sequester cuts. Likewise, the senate called for \$516.6 billion for defense, or \$19 billion **more** than the deficit reduction law allowed for in FY 2014. However, it was kinder to domestic spending programs. It seems that the House has taken this opportunity to further its agenda of increased military spending and drastic cuts in domestic spending.

Now seven months into sequestration, the economy has not tanked and people are resuming their lives, not giving it a second thought. Most people are probably unaware that due to the nature of budgets, most of the cuts did not occur immediately. Money was already in the pipeline, and the budget cuts are just now taking effect.

How will this affect Virginia? On June 25 the Virginia Interfaith Center on Public Policy held a conference to discuss this question. Most disturbing to me was that it seems that no one in government is really tracking this. Especially on the local level; no one in our city government seems to be responsible for tracking how much money, jobs, programs, etc., will be cut from our budgets over the next 10 years. What we **do** know has been compiled by the Coalition on Human Needs: In addition, it is

estimated that Virginia will lose about 150,000 jobs over the next year, 102,000 in defense.

The Coalition on Human Needs has also compiled some anecdotal evidence of the impact of budget cuts in Virginia:

Housing and Homelessness:

Elmer Winn Jr., 59, received a rental voucher from Fairfax County, but before he could find housing, it was rescinded due to sequestration budget cuts. Winn, who uses an oxygen tank and has had a collapsed lung four times, now pays \$400 rent to sleep in a friend's kitchen out of \$710 in Social Security Disability and \$35 in food stamps.

His friend was just recently hospitalized and Winn will lose that space. Due to sequestration, Section 8 housing choice rental vouchers have been frozen in Fairfax County. (From *The McLean Patch*—4/10/13—by William Callahan)

Continued on Page 7

Sequester Damage to Virginia

Children and mothers in Virginia losing WIC nutrition aid	10,000
Low-income families losing rental housing vouchers	2,287
Formerly homeless losing housing	Who knows?*
Children denied Head Start	No one knows*
Funds cut from Head Start	\$6 million
Cuts ending services to K-12 children	\$14 million
Fewer people with disabilities served	1,612
Fewer meals on wheels to seniors	??????
Adults and children losing treatment for serious mental illness	Who cares?*
Long-term unemployed losing benefits	Don't know*

http://www.chn.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/VA_sheet.pdf

* Irony provided by article author

Sequester Slashes

Continued from Page 6

Services for Seniors:

In Roanoke, the Local Office on Aging expects to have \$95,000 cut from its \$1 million annual budget this year. For the first time in the agency's history, they have a waiting list of seniors who want nutrition assistance, while 50 seniors have been cut from their daily meals client list

Seventy-year-old William McCormick volunteered to forgo his daily meal after hearing this news. "I thought about it for two or three days and I said, 'right now my health's pretty good,' and so I just gave it up. I just couldn't bear the thought of me having something to eat and maybe somebody else needing it and they couldn't apply for it so I just voluntarily gave it up." (from *The Huffington Post* – 6/4/13—by Arthur Delaney)

Benefits for Long-term Unemployed:

The Virginia Employment Commission announced that as of May 12 it would be reducing federal Emergency Unemployment Compensation by 14.2 percent per week. The maximum unemployment benefit in Virginia is \$378 a week; jobless people in Virginia will lose \$54 a week from their checks. (From the VEC)

Education:

In Norton, Kids Central, a Head Start program, had to slice 10 days off its school year as well as other cuts in supplies and maintenance. (From CNN Money.com – 5/24/13—by Jennifer Liberto)

Job Programs:

According to Florhline Painter, president of the Work Force Job Center, summer youth programs in Shenandoah Valley shut down this summer, affecting over 100 low-income youth. (From *The Washington Post* – May 2013 – photo gallery)

What would be a more just distribution of our common economic goods?

Austerity measures in Europe have shown that decreased domestic spending is not the answer to a recession. Decreased domestic spending spirals an economy downward, as people who have less to spend, spend less and pay less taxes, while retailers and manufacturers sell less, pay their employees less, and so on. Increased domestic spending can reverse this trend. But money poured into a military economy becomes concentrated in the wealth of a few and increases the gap between rich and poor.

The Friends Committee on National Legislation has recommended a shift in our budget priorities, arguing that "the U.S. will be safer abroad and more secure at home" if we reduce military spending and increase domestic spending. Noting that the Pentagon budget dwarfs the military budgets of the next 29 biggest spenders in the world, the Friends group proposes the following reductions:

End Pentagon Waste and Fraud:

Between **\$31 and \$60 billion** were lost to waste and fraud related to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan according to the Commission on Wartime Contracting. The Pentagon's books are not currently auditable, according to the Pentagon's comptroller, Robert Hale.

Close Bases Leftover from Past Wars:

The U.S. stations about 135,000 active troops on bases around the world. Reducing that number by just 25 percent would save about \$80 billion over the next 10 years.

Adapt the Nuclear Weapons Budget:

More than 20 years after the end of the Cold War, the U.S. is still funding a nuclear weapons arsenal designed to overpower the USSR. Our country's stockpile of over 5,000 nuclear warheads is enough to destroy the planet several times over.

Rein in Profits of Military Contractors: Spending on procurement from contractors amounted to roughly a trillion dollars between 2001 and 2010. Stock prices of major military contractors more than doubled during this period.

Freeing up funds from the Pentagon would allow Congress to:

Create more jobs—For every 100 jobs created by Pentagon spending, the same investment would create 251 jobs in education, 169 jobs in health care, or 147 in clean energy.

Care for Wounded Veterans: Veterans benefits are not a part of the military budget, but are included under domestic spending through the Veterans' Administration. The cost of caring for wounded veterans over the next 40 years has been estimated at between 600 billion and a trillion dollars.

Create more Security at Home – The U.S. leads the world in military might, but ranks at or below the median among our 34 trading partners in the OECD on reading, scientific, and math proficiency, and is below average for the number of young adults who complete college, and near the bottom of the list for infant mortality and child poverty.

El-Amin Disputes McDonnell

Continued from Page 1

to restore his rights on various constitutional grounds, centered on the long history of suppression of African American voting in Virginia and other states. El-Amin has emphasized, however, that his goal is to win voting rights for all ex-felons, not just himself. "I don't want my rights restored until everyone's rights are restored," he said.

The filing came months before the Governor urged the 2013 General Assembly to start the process of amending the Virginia Constitution's lifetime restriction on voting and civil rights for ex-felons. The Assembly, following its usual practice, killed any bills for restoration, and the Governor countered with his own program for automatic restoration of rights for "non-violent" felons. The Governor's plan, announced on May 29, was to be effective on July 15.

"Prior to the lawsuit, there was little or no political interest in automatic restoration by McDonnell or

the General Assembly," El-Amin stated on January 10. "McDonnell is painfully aware of the potential for Virginia to lose this lawsuit which is why he is trying to score some political points by appearing to favor automatic reinstatement rather than being forced to do so as a consequence of losing the lawsuit."

Whether or not McDonnell had any thought of pre-empting El-Amin's lawsuit, the Governor's initiative has had that effect.

On May 30, Judge John A. Gibney Jr., who has shepherded the case over the past year, directed the parties to explain the effect of McDonnell's announcement. On June 20, Gibney ruled:

"Considering that the announced policy may render the case moot, the Court hereby stays this case until September 1, 2013."

A major issue for El-Amin is raised by McDonnell's focus on "nonviolent" felons, who alone would merit the newly extended

"automatic" restoration, while so-called "violent" felons would have to follow the present practice of applying – after a five-year wait – for the governor's grant of restoration.

El-Amin, in his court filings, refers only to "ex-felons," not distinguishing them as "violent" or "non-violent." In separate comments on McDonnell's call to the General Assembly, El-Amin noted:

"I am not in favor of McDonnell's current proposal because it does not provide for the restoration of the rights of all persons who have been convicted of a felony no matter the kind or type of felony.

"I believe that the treatment difference between violent and nonviolent felonies has already been taken into account by the length of sentence.

Once a person serves his or her sentence, there should be no distinction in the restoration of rights process. McDonnell's proposal to use the type of crime as the differentiating factor to automatic restoration makes disenfranchisement more akin to punishment than a public policy bar."

The felon voting issue is further entangled in questions of race — is disenfranchisement of felons an extension of "the new Jim Crow" — a covert strategy to keep blacks from the polls?

In his initial petition, El-Amin asked that the Court find "that Virginia's history of suppressing the black vote establishes by a preponderance of evidence racial discrimination which was a substantial and motivating factor in the adoption of the 1870 and subsequent revisions of Virginia's constitution and that the disenfranchisement of El-Amin's right to vote in Virginia is a denial of his equal protection rights."

The defendants, noting the 14th Amendment's provision that the right to vote could be abridged "for participation in rebellion or other crime,"

Continued on Page 9

Departing, El-Amin Calls City 'Non-governable'

Despite premature reports of Sa'ad El-Amin's move from Richmond to Texas, as July passed into August, El-Amin was still in Richmond, clearing up his affairs and overseeing the progress of his Federal Court lawsuit seeking restoration of voting rights for ex-felons such as himself.

Over 40-plus years since he settled in Richmond in 1969, fresh from Yale Law School, El-Amin has been raising Richmond hackles with biting commentary on race relations, political leadership and other aggravating topics. Elected to City Council in 1998, he resigned in 2003 to serve a three-year term in federal prison for tax evasion. Back in action, he joined the effort to reclaim the old slave burial ground in Shockoe Bottom from a VCU parking lot. Richmond's Style Weekly, in reporting El-Amin's pending move, recalled his advice to VCU: "Get your 'ASS-phalt' off our ancestors."

With his lawsuit now awaiting decision, El-Amin sees a dead end in Richmond. "There's a lot of potential here, but because of the attitudes and trajectory, the city can't achieve that potential. The city is non-governable. It's basically bankrupt; it has no viable tax base; it gets no assistance from outside."

Richmond's best solution, El-Amin says, would be to turn in its city charter and divide itself between the counties from which it was carved over the last 300 years. Meanwhile, he adds, "the band plays on."

El-Amin Disputes McDonnell

Continued from Page 8

denied that El-Amin's situation was even covered by the 14th Amendment's Equal Protection shield.

Virginia's history of suppressing the black vote was merely old history, the defendants asserted: "Of course, the fact that the final revision of the Virginia Constitution took place in 1970 breaks the alleged chain of historical causation. . . . It is therefore implausible to allege that the generally constitutional practice of disqualifying felons, which remained in the 1970 version, was intended to violate the United States Constitution or other federal law."

In attacking another of El-Amin's claims — that disenfranchisement violates the 8th Amendment ban on cruel or unusual punishments — the defendants cited a Supreme Court opinion that laws denying voting rights to convicted felons are "a non-penal exercise of the power to regulate the franchise." As such, the defendants asserted, "Virginia's disenfranchisement scheme is neither a punishment nor a penalty in contemplation of law."

The question then begging answer is: If disenfranchisement is neither punishment nor penalty, what is it, other than simple vengeance, disguised as reasonable public policy?

Even if El-Amin wins these points, his case could founder on the ground of "standing" — whether he has suffered an injury. True to his contention that he sues not to regain not his own rights but the rights of all

ex-felons, El-Amin has not applied for a grant by the governor, even though he has fulfilled all the conditions of his sentence. His restraint offered a clear target for the defendants to attack:

"Because El-Amin has not even applied for restoration of his rights, he lacks standing to bring a challenge to the restoration process. . . ."

For El-Amin, it's "Catch-22" — by seeking restoration of his rights, he could lose the right to challenge the process that denied it.

The questions raised by El-Amin deserve public discussion and

thoughtful answers, neither of which has been offered by McDonnell or any of the legislators who reject any loosening of the straitjacket around ex-felons.

Glaringly absent from the debate is the overriding question whether denial of the right to vote helps to make ex-felons better citizens, better able to rejoin the society that punished them.

Sa'ad El-Amin may or may not win his case. But he has framed the issues which sooner or later must be faced if justice will be served for 350,000 Virginia ex-felons for whom the right to vote has for too long been an impossible dream.

RPEC's Ballpark View: 'Preserve Shockoe Bottom'

Entering the ongoing debate over whether a new baseball stadium should be located in Shockoe Bottom, RPEC has given its view: "We must preserve the historical sites in Shockoe Bottom." In a statement issued on July 15, the RPEC Board of Directors stated:

"A baseball stadium in Shockoe Bottom would impinge on, if not desecrate, the historical memories now honored by the Richmond Slave Trail and the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project. This alone is sufficient reason to put such an intrusive project elsewhere. The area where as many as 350,000 human beings were sold into slavery, where thousands more were jailed and many died and were buried must be protected as a memorial to those who suffered here, and as an inspiration to future generations as they strive to build a society of justice and inter-racial harmony.

"Preserving and protecting those areas of our city that are historically and culturally significant to all our citizens is essential.

"The Peace Center has recognized the efforts of the Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project, which led the effort to reclaim the site of the African Burial Ground from beneath a VCU parking lot, honoring them as our Peacemaker of the Year for 2011.

"We stand with all those who are working for the preservation of historic spaces in this precious historical area of our city."

Our Mission

The Richmond Peace Education Center is working to build a more peaceful and just community in the Richmond, Virginia area. Since its founding in 1980, the center has been a leading voice for nonviolence and social justice, offering programs on conflict resolution and violence prevention, racial justice, and global issues. RPEC needs your involvement. Contact the office to plug in: rpec@rpec.org or 232-1002. Together, we can build a more peaceful and just community and world.