Community Rights Statement by 100 Grannies for a Livable Future

Today we find ourselves in a world predicated on constant growth, development, and extraction – and traditional environmental advocacy only tinkers around the edges of this system. Unsurprisingly, more than forty years after our major environmental laws were passed things have gotten worse, from species loss, to toxins in the environment, to global warming.

We are convinced that the only chance we have to retain a livable planet is to step outside of the conventional legal system. We are basing our authority to do that on the Declaration of Independence and the Iowa Constitution, Article 1, Bill of Rights, Section 2 which states: “All political power is inherent in the people. Government is instituted for the protection, security, and benefit of the people, and they have the right, at all times, to alter or reform the same, whenever the public good may require it.”

We in the 100 Grannies for a Livable Future, have come to understand that we can no longer expect our elected, heavily-lobbied state and federal officials, or their government regulatory agencies, to prevent corporations from harming us and destroying the natural world, which is the source of all life. We are determined to introduce a Community Bill of Rights which will allow the Johnson County/Iowa City community to determine the environment we wish to live in. We also intend to write and work toward passage of a Johnson County ordinance and/or an amendment to the Iowa City Home Rule Charter that incorporates those principles and enumerates the specific rights to be secured to the community to enforce them.

We are committed to protecting this portion of the planet by opposing the current power structures and to regain our democratic right to keep our children’s children safe and our beautiful planet healthy.

Background Information

At the encouragement of Miriam Kashia, a member of 100Grannies who walked across America last year with the Great March for Climate Action, many of us participated in an online class entitled “Democracy School” created by the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund (CELDF.org).

We learned that we as citizens do not have the democratic power that we thought we had. We learned that our nation was never actually a democracy – when the Constitution was signed, only 5 to 10 % of the people were eligible to vote and the men who wrote that Constitution were wealthy aristocrats who wanted to maximize their profits from the land and the natural resources they “owned.” However, in the first three decades of the United States, even these well-to-do landowners mistrusted corporations, and before any corporation could be chartered by the state, it had to be passed by both chambers of the state legislature and signed by the governor. Charters were only granted for a single purpose that would do no harm and would serve the public good (for example, bridges or hospitals); corporations had a limited life span; and they were not allowed to make contributions to organizations or charities or to own any land beyond what was necessary to fulfill their purpose.

Now we live in a world where corporations have privileges, like limited liability, as well as the corporate constitutional “rights” that the Supreme Court has granted them over the last two centuries A vivid example is that when the first oleo-margarine in the late 1800’s was made from meat packing waste, states and communities tried to protect themselves by prohibiting the transportation and sale of these products, but those laws were ruled illegal (by the Supreme Court) due to the corporations’ rights under the commerce clause of the Constitution. Also, during the time of industrial expansion in the U.S., corporations encouraged the government to establish regulatory agencies that would appear to protect the public but were really to act as a buffer between the corporation and the fear and anger of the people. So the purpose of regulatory agencies is to direct citizen concern to one small area of the problem. For CAFOs the allowed issue is manure management, for big box stores it is the square footage of the store.

Approximately 200 communities in nine states have passed local Community Bill of Rights ordinances to protect themselves from these and other threats to their health and wellbeing, taking back their right to protect the public good.