

Nourishing Community and Lowering Energy Burdens in Dewey City: A Climate Digest Interview

Summary

How do you rebuild a neighborhood's spirit while lowering its energy bills? In this conversation, Earl Williams, Consultant, and Katie Chastain, Special Project Director, at the Thomasville Community Development Corporation (TCDC) join host Eriqah Vincent to talk about how a Drawdown Georgia Climate Solutions & Equity Grant is funding both a plant-based meal program for seniors and a home weatherization and solar initiative in Dewey City, a historic Black neighborhood in South Georgia.

Key Takeaways

- TCDC's Drawdown Georgia grant funds two connected projects: a plant-based lunch program for seniors and a push toward solar energy, both aimed at building resiliency in Dewey City, one of Thomasville's underinvested neighborhoods.
- TCDC is combining weatherization with an EPA Community Change Grant to reduce energy burden, the percentage of household income that goes toward energy bills, for residents who are often paying as much for electricity as they do for rent or a mortgage.
- The plant-based meal program is fully local: produce from Black farmers is sold through a recently reopened neighborhood grocery store, prepared by a local caterer, and delivered by another local entrepreneur, all graduates of the Spark Entrepreneurs Program.
- Dewey City holds deep historical significance as one of the first places Black families could own land after slavery was abolished, and TCDC's approach centers on surfacing and investing in the community's existing assets rather than treating it as a problem to be solved.
- Earl and Katie find hope in how quickly local entrepreneurs stepped up once the opportunity was announced, and in the resilience and self-sufficiency of rural communities that are often left out of climate funding.

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Eriqah Vincent: Hi, everybody, thank you so much for joining us for this Drawdown Georgia Climate Interview series. I'm so excited to have a Drawdown Georgia Climate Solutions and Equity Grant recipient organization in partnership with us today. So we're going to jump right in — I'm really excited to have Earl Williams and Katie Chastain from the Thomasville Community Development Corporation.

Thank you all so much for being here, Earl and Katie. I'd like to start by asking you both to introduce yourselves, and the work the Thomasville Community Development Corporation does in your community.

Earl Williams: My name is Earl Williams, I work for the Thomasville Community Development Corporation. Our mission is to improve the quality of life and wealth creation opportunities for residents of Thomasville's underinvested neighborhoods.

Katie Chastain: I'll just say, Earl is often our community engagement on the ground, figuring out how to connect resources and identify needs in our neighborhoods. My name is Katie Chastain, I'm also with the Thomasville Community Development Corporation. The sides of the house I generally work on are tax credit development and housing, and we're also standing up a Community Development Loan Fund to provide access to capital. So those are kind of my areas.

Earl Williams: It's interesting, the two people you see on the screen — this is Thomasville Community Development Corporation. We're involved in a LIHTC-funded apartment complex — we're taking an old high school and transforming it into low-income housing for seniors, about 52 units. We also have an EPA Community Change Grant we just received a couple of weeks ago, and we're taking that same site and dividing it into two different pieces. One piece is the apartment conversion, the other piece is the historic gym from this old, historically Black high school, and we're going to take that gym and turn it into a climate resilience center — or what we're seeing right now as a community resilience center. We're excited because all of this comes together — when you think about it, it's all about trying to make the planet healthier, and trying to make the people who live on this planet healthier.

Eriqah Vincent: Thank you so much for that introduction, both to yourselves and to your organization. We mentioned to our viewers before the Drawdown Georgia Climate Solutions and Equity Grant, which is presented by Drawdown Georgia and a number of amazing philanthropic partners across the state committed to climate solutions and equity in Georgia. Congratulations to you both for being part of the 2025–2026 cohort of that grant — very exciting, and I remember reviewing your application, well deserved. Please tell our audience more about the work the grant is funding in your community for the Thomasville Community Development Corporation.

Earl Williams: One of the things I want to explain is why Dewey City — that's the part of Thomasville we're focusing on right now. If you look at the grant, that's a part of town we talk about heavily. Dewey City was once a thriving part of Thomasville, Georgia, and I believe that in order for Thomasville to continue to thrive, to be sustained, to be a sustainable community, we must restore Dewey City, along with other underinvested neighborhoods similar to it. Most of these neighborhoods are on the south and west side of our town.

Katie Chastain: And to answer your question, Eriqah, the two pieces of our proposal — one was about plant-based diets, and one was for solar energy. The 52-unit apartment complex Earl mentioned earlier is a low-income housing tax credit project we're just about to kick off construction on. The really cool part about our partners at Drawdown Georgia is, the funding is awesome, but they've also been connecting us to resources to help, because this is the first time we've had a major solar project in Thomasville, so we need all the expertise and help we can get. This network has really already leaned in to provide not just the funding, but also the resource network. We're really excited about both sides of the grant we received. Like Earl said, it's all about resiliency — what we're learning in our neighborhood development work is that neighborhood development is resiliency work, and that's what we want for our neighborhoods.

Eriqah Vincent: Absolutely, absolutely, I couldn't agree more, and that's really exciting, the ways you all have already been connected to the resources you need. I also heard you mention the

Community Change Grant you received — congratulations on that. So it sounds like there's so much moving forward with the way you're doing your work, which is really exciting, especially in these various parts of Georgia. I'm familiar with energy burdens, but some of our audience might not be, so I definitely want you to explain that piece of your work, what an energy burden is, or what you all define it as. And then I also want to focus on why energy burdens and access to fresh fruits and vegetables in Dewey City — what in particular do you see in Dewey City that calls for the need for those two pieces to come together?

Earl Williams: One of the things we're doing is looking at affordable housing — that's one of our objectives, and one of the ways we can make housing more affordable is to reduce that energy burden. The way we do that is, as part of our grant from the EPA, the Community Change Grant, we have a home improvement component, and within that component we'll do massive amounts of weatherization to many older houses in our communities, which will reduce the energy burden. And of course, if we can combine that with solar energy, that will be even better. One of the things I'm thinking about moving forward is trying to find money for some of the houses we'll be building in our communities to get solar panels put on those homes — find grants to do that — because we're trying to create affordable housing, and the equation is very difficult. We have to buy the land, we have to build the property, prices are going up, and the housing industry is one of the few industries that, over the last century, hasn't really seen any productivity enhancements in building a house. So we have to figure out creative ways to do it, and I think one of the creative ways moving forward is if we can add a solar component to the new houses we're building, and also take the older houses in our neighborhood and make sure the indoor and outdoor air quality in those neighborhoods is good, and that houses have sufficient airflow in and out, and are warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer, through weatherization improvements.

Katie Chastain: Yeah, and in addition to the affordability piece, the plant-based diet part has been really cool. We're really excited, because it was such a natural fit when we saw the Drawdown Georgia opportunity. There's so much in the historic Dewey City neighborhood — historically, this neighborhood bartered with each other, there were small farms already in this neighborhood. When you talk to the older residents who live there, they talk about the chickens they used to trade for the grapefruits from Mr. So-and-so, and the collard greens from Mr. So-and-so. So it's really cool to start seeing some of that energy come back, and people reinvest in their gardens. There's still a handful of older residents with really great gardens — we just had one of our residents, a month or two ago, do a huge giveaway of — was it turnip greens, Earl, or collard?

Earl Williams: Collard greens.

Katie Chastain: Collard greens, to the community. And we also recently had one of our board members from the Community Development Corporation open up a neighborhood market. Historically, there were these Black-owned markets within the neighborhood, where community really happened, and we're really excited to see this market come back — he's been partnering with Black farmers from our surrounding area to carry fresh produce in his market. There's still the affordability piece to crack, and there are a lot of partnerships we've been building into our program design to support the farmers, local chefs, the market owner, and neighborhood gardeners, and how they tie into it. So we're pulling in a lot of pieces, but this grant opportunity has given us the chance to get a little bit of funding behind it, so we can start to tie together all these people and pieces that already existed in the neighborhood. I think that's the beauty, and why I feel so fortunate to work alongside Earl, because he grew up in these neighborhoods, and

he knows the assets — he goes and finds them, and surfaces them, and finds them extra support, so they can thrive. Because the elements are there — they're like diamonds, we just need to brush them off a little bit.

Eriqah Vincent: I love what you all mentioned there about affordable housing, but also about the bartering piece. I think we see, in different communities, how it was once common for us to trade as a community, to help each other — we think about Thomasville and Dewey City, but also places like Auburn Avenue in Atlanta, which was a hub especially for Black folks. At one time there was always something people could share with each other. I'm from up north, and have been in Atlanta for almost 20 years, and I've heard stories from my community up there too. I think getting back to that, and being cognizant of it, not only trading for goods, but also the ways it builds community, is really important. I'm really glad you all received this grant from Drawdown Georgia, also because South Georgia — correct me if I'm wrong — is a more rural community, and we often see these types of grants get centered in the metro. So being able to see how these things can benefit the whole state, not just the metro, is really warming my heart to see. I think that's really great and powerful, what you're talking about. I want to give our audience, if you don't know what energy burden is — it's really about how much of a household's income is spent on energy. There are different metrics and statistics for different communities and neighborhoods, but when organizations talk about energy burden, that's typically what they're referring to, and we've seen a swell over the last couple of years in how much people's household incomes go toward energy usage. We think about people, in real time, in real life, thinking, am I going to buy medicine, or am I going to pay our Georgia Power bill, our energy bill — are we going to buy groceries, or are we going to pay the power bill? That's a real burden for a lot of communities, so to see organizations doing work around that, trying to mitigate that for communities, is really, really important.

Katie Chastain: Yeah, Eriqah, that was kind of the refrain we kept hearing over and over in the neighborhoods we serve — people are paying as much for an energy bill as they are for their rent payment or their mortgage payment. In Thomasville we have city-owned utilities, so the city owns the electric company, and people come to the city saying, you all are charging so much for electricity — that might be a piece of it, but a bigger piece is often that these are older homes, and a large part of them are poorly insulated. So some of the home improvement grant work we're doing, we hope, will help mitigate that, and layering on the solar is the other piece. So, like Earl said, there's not one solution to it, but overall, energy burden is a huge part of people's housing and living costs. When it's sweltering hot outside and you need to run the AC, it's really not a luxury — it's a health issue, when you don't have air conditioning, or can't turn it on because it's too expensive to run.

Eriqah Vincent: Thank you for bringing up energy burden and defining that, because it's a huge issue in our neighborhoods up here in Atlanta too, and y'all live in South Georgia.

Earl Williams: Eriqah, the thing that exacerbates that is also that we live in an ever-aging community here — the largest population of people are probably over 60 years of age, and it's getting older, and they're all on fixed incomes. This is a real thing. I really think renewable energy sources are the way we need to start thinking more seriously about in our city. I think we have city government behind us — they seem to want to cooperate with us on this. I can see so many ways we can help people get into homes they couldn't otherwise afford, by having some type of solar energy.

Katie Chastain: And you mentioned rural — it really is kind of cool that that was baked into the grant, and I'm starting to hear more philanthropy thinking about pushing money outside of the metro area. We know there are huge needs for our urban neighbors, but it's kind of amazing — there's just been a lot of energy in our community in response to this grant, because it's like, it never happens that we get this kind of funding, especially for something like green energy. It's a little bit of education for our community, or maybe a lot of education — we're learning how to do it. But again, the resources Drawdown Georgia is bringing, and the expertise along with the funding, has been really remarkable. And, like you said, historically we are pretty self-sufficient, and I think rural people in general tend to be pretty self-sufficient, because we're removed from the resource networks. If you provide a little bit of help, it seems like it goes a long way. I hope this investment will really pay big dividends, because we've got such a strong, self-sufficient, historic population that's ready to move.

Eriqah Vincent: Wonderful. I'm a city kid through and through — I moved from a very popular city, I'm from Newark, New Jersey, down to Atlanta, Georgia. Especially in doing this work for as long as I've been doing it, which is almost as long as I've been in Atlanta, I have such reverence for the resiliency and resourcefulness of rural folks, and the work y'all are doing in your communities to be self-sufficient. I think, as much as I love us city kids — a lot of things are at our fingertips — being able to work it out is definitely something rural communities have down pat in a lot of senses, and I have a lot of reverence and admiration for those folks. When we look at maps, especially as a metropolitan person, you think all these people are on the coasts, right, east coast and west coast, but we know a large part of the United States is rural, especially in the South, the Midwest, and the mountain ranges. So if we're going to have these climate solutions, we have to make sure we're authentically including our rural neighbors and siblings — it's really important for us to think about that always, in philanthropy and in other resources and programs.

Earl Williams: So, Eriqah, what I find interesting is, when you look at America, approximately 20 percent of the population lives in rural areas, but 90 percent of the people living in persistent poverty live in rural America. So it's quite a challenge — it really is quite a challenge. But on the other hand, it's an opportunity — the opportunity to see creative ways to get out of this, and rural people are very resilient, they can adapt.

Eriqah Vincent: Absolutely. And if we're doing climate solutions on the whole, and we're not including rural communities, then we're not doing them sufficiently — we're not including rural communities in a real and authentic way, not just checking the box, but authentically. So that's fantastic. What do you see, what do you foresee, as the biggest challenges facing you in your work, both for this project, the grant this project is working on, but in other ways too, and how have you, and how will you, continue to overcome those challenges?

Earl Williams: Those are hard questions.

Katie Chastain: One we've been working on since we started, and since Earl came on board, is that we're a new organization — we're only three years old — and trust within our communities is always, I think, in any community development work, maybe the hardest challenge. We continually remind ourselves that we have to lead from behind, and follow the energy of the neighborhood. So trust is one, and the other I keep mentioning is just the social capital, human capital piece — we need talent and resources, and connecting existing talent with the resources to develop that talent, I think, is the other challenge we face.

Earl Williams: I agree with Katie on that, I think those are really challenging things. But I think one of the challenges is that we always look at our underinvested communities as problems to be solved, and I think the way we get over that barrier is by looking at it as opportunities we can cultivate — because if we look at it as a problem to be solved, we're not going to get anywhere. But if we look at it from a more positive direction, there's something here, we can learn something and provide it to everyone once we fix it here. One of the biggest barriers is just how we see these communities. One of the things I've been doing is community walks, where I take people through our neighborhoods that have a lot of opportunity — people who aren't really from that community, people from outside the community — because I want to help them understand why we think that community is worth investing in. I want them to have an appreciation, so I try to let them understand what the assets are. For example, the one we keep mentioning, Dewey City — Dewey City was sacred ground for Black people in this area. It was the first place, after slavery, that Black people were able to own and buy property. There's a creek here with one little area that's almost like a pond, where Black churches would bring their members to baptize them. We have the first Black high school that was in this county, and it's in Dewey City. All these things are historical landmarks, and we have so many assets — this community is worth bringing back up. That's one of the challenges. I think the other challenge is that, in our communities right now, a lot of times I tell people — some people understand, and some people don't — what about that community, is it the problem with the community? The community doesn't exist the way it existed before, so we have to figure out how to get people back into that community, not just physically, but mentally and actively working to make the community better. A big challenge is getting more of a sense of community back into those fractured communities. About 30 percent of the people who live in those communities own homes, 70 percent are renters, and so the challenge there is — my initial knee-jerk reaction is, well, those renters aren't part of the community — but they actually are, and we need to make sure we lift those people up too. What's really good about our home improvement grant that we'll be putting out soon is that we'll not only help improve houses that people are living in and that they own, but we'll also improve houses being rented to folks, and we'll work with the landlord to make sure that whatever investments we make in that house, the rent won't go up for a set number of years.

Eriqah Vincent: That's fantastic. I've got a lot of thoughts about what you said, about people not thinking renters are part of the community, but I agree with you a hundred percent — there are so many implications behind that, around affordable housing, and around making sure everyone who lives there, regardless of whether they're a homeowner or a property owner, has what they need to exist and thrive, safely and comfortably, in their community. That's so powerful, what you're saying there, and thank you for that little history lesson on Dewey City — I'm always honored to hear about the towns and areas in the South that have those types of stories. My grandmother is from South Carolina, so I have familiar stories I was told as a young kid, and I'm always interested in honoring and giving space for those stories. We've been talking a lot about challenges, and about what you all are doing, which is really phenomenal, and I'd love to hear anything more you'd like to share with our audience. I would love to be one of those people who takes one of those community walks with you, Earl, so I'll take you up on that. But I also want to know, in our last and closing question — what gives you all hope around climate in Georgia? What gives you hope around the work you're doing down there in Thomasville and Dewey City?

Earl Williams: I think we could talk about the plant-based food diet piece — what we're going to do with that money — we're taking it from two different perspectives. It's a way of introducing, to a part of our community, we're dealing with basically seniors who go to a daytime senior center

— we're talking about feeding about 40 to 50 people, four times a week, for lunch. This isn't a controlled study by any means, but this is another way we can build trust in the community, by showing we're trying to take care of the community. What's interesting about what we're doing is, we're trying to introduce plant-based diets to this whole senior population, and at the same time, we're running a business model with this program — we're trying to prove to different people in the community how the community can work within itself. We're taking food — we have a grocery store, which Katie mentioned earlier, a local grocery store that just reopened, run by one of our board members, in this targeted community. This grocery store will buy produce from local Black farmers, and he'll sell the produce to a local guy who lives in the neighborhood, who's a food service and catering business, and he'll pull together these plant-based meals. We have another guy who'll take the plant-based meals from his kitchen to the senior center, so they can have lunch. We have all of these entrepreneurs within this community, and not only that, we have a public health person who'll be consulting and helping us out, and someone who does health diagnostic testing — she'll be helping us out as well. What's interesting about all these people is that they're all, like me, graduates of a program we have called the Spark Entrepreneurs Program — it's a local nonprofit that trains local entrepreneurs in the minority community. Each person, each piece I mentioned, is part of that entrepreneurial circle, and they're all products of that same program. So to me, we have two things going on — we're going to introduce healthier lifestyles to seniors in our community, and we're teaching entrepreneurs how to work together and keep the money within their community.

But before I stop, I've got to tell you one story — this is true, it's about plant-based diets. A couple of my friends wanted me to go to a local buffet place — I don't really like buffet places, for the most part, but we went, they had their wives, I brought my wife, we were eating, and one of the wives asked the waitress, "So, those beans, where did they come from?" And she said, "A can." Well, that puts me back to plant-based diets, and sourcing locally — yes, that's what we're doing, so that's the beauty of what we're trying to do here. Really sourcing it locally is healthier for people, and it's also healthier for our local economy.

Katie Chastain: Yeah, I think what he's showing is that it's the individuals who make us excited — each of those individual entrepreneurs, it's incredible. We put it out on the internet, here's an opportunity, if you want to be involved, let us know, and these incredible entrepreneurs all reached back out and said, I do plant-based food, I have a market, I'm a farmer, I do diagnostics, I'd like to be part of this. I think that's what's been really exciting — people have come out of the woodwork with their talents and their businesses to be part of it. So we're super grateful for Drawdown Georgia and this opportunity — I think it's really going to do great stuff in our neighborhoods.

Earl Williams: We'll be back.

Katie Chastain: And we hope you all come and walk with Earl, because it really is entertaining — you'll hear all the good stories.

Eriqah Vincent: I'm really going to do it.

Katie Chastain: Come on, Eriqah, it's fun.

Earl Williams: We used to have a billboard that said, "Thomasville, Georgia — it's worth the trip."

Katie Chastain: It is worth the trip.

Earl Williams: And we have really good restaurants here too.

Eriqah Vincent: Thank you all so much for being here, and for sharing your story, both about the work you're doing with this grant and with the Thomasville Community Development Corporation, but also about your town, and about Dewey City. I think hearing about these things is why we're doing this interview series — we want to introduce people to different parts of the great state of Georgia, and different communities doing things under sometimes impossible circumstances. Some folks have a lot of resources, some folks have very little, but everyone is doing the best they can with what they have. We love bringing these stories to this audience. Thank you all — thank you, Earl, thank you, Katie, for being with me today, talking about the great work you're doing, and sharing the passion you have for your community. Thank you all for joining us once again for this series — I hope you'll come back for our next guests, we'll see everybody next time. Thanks, Earl and Katie. Bye-bye, everybody.