



# Pushing harder for progress in 2014

Over the past year, I've often thought of something the former mayor of Charlotte, N.C., said during an Editorial Board meeting as we launched our Unite Rochester campaign: "Who is it that cares?"

The point made by Harvey Gantt, one of the first and longest-serving African-American mayors of a major Southern city, was well taken: There must be buy-in by all segments of the community to succeed in addressing Rochester's racial and economic inequities.

Gantt spoke from experience because as a direct result of Charlotte residents mobilizing decades ago, that city is now a thriving community.

After only a year of Unite Rochester, we can hardly even begin to claim victory in getting our community to care more about inequities. But there are encouraging indicators of progress. Perhaps foremost, the spirit of Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony, who from Rochester spearheaded national crusades for justice and equality, is starting to be revived.

All across the community, conversations about race and inequality are popping up. They're taking place more often on college campuses, at public libraries, houses of worship, coffee shops and in private homes.

To stay on this path, in the year ahead the Editorial Board, with the addition of two new community members, Jim Ryan Jr. and Anna Valeria-Iseman, will push beyond conversations. Expect more action from us to help make the Rochester region the world class community that it's capable of becoming for all of its residents. The community partners we've worked with on this journey, such as the Facing Race = Embracing Equity initia-

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...tive, are swelling. We recognized early on the importance of face-to-face conversations with citizens about the sensitive topic of race and inequality, so we launched our Editorial Board Listening Tour. This effort paid off with community leaders and everyday people coming together to begin addressing such persistent problems as joblessness, housing and education. Clearly they care.

New to our list of community-crushing concerns needing focused attention is the topic of justice. During the more than half a dozen Listening Tour meetings the board held last year, the court and public safety systems kept bubbling up. As it happened, Judge Craig Doran, chief judge for the Rochester region, and Chuck Perreaud, Monroe County jury commissioner, contacted me to enlist in Unite Rochester.

Together, we're planning a February meeting to which local judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys and law enforcement leaders will be invited. The purpose: How to make justice more just in Monroe County. Stay tuned as we bring community members into the early planning to develop new strategies.

Meantime, a group of city and suburban elected and appointed leaders formed after a Listening Tour stop last June is offering great promise. Talks are underway, for instance, between the Monroe County Sheriff's Office and the City School District about utilizing the

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SPECIAL REPORT FROM THE EDITORIAL BOARD

## Unite Rochester



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district's new law enforcement academy to help address serious diversity deficiencies in the sheriff's department.

And as a result of a breakfast meeting hosted late last year by *Democrat and Chronicle* Publisher Michael G. Kane, local business leaders are organizing to begin chipping away at such problems as minority hiring.

In the works are efforts to bring the presidents of the region's colleges and universities together to help tackle the problem Mayor Lovely Warren characterized as "Two Rochesters."

It's obvious that, indeed, Rochester cares. Our challenge this year is to generate more caring *and* action.

Please join us.

## Jobs

Reliable employment is arguably the most critical building block for stable families, housing and staying out of the criminal justice system. The creation of jobs, across a wide spectrum of skill levels, remains a key area of focus for Unite Rochester.

It's not breaking news: For some Rochester ZIP codes, predominantly inhabited by people of color, joblessness surpassing the Great Depression has become the norm. Tightly concentrated pockets of poverty transcend generations and erode the city's neighborhoods, safety and tax base.

The need is glaring. But too often, too easily, it is neglected.

More must be done to bond companies and communities. In November, the Editorial Board convened business leaders interested in being agents of change. Those who raised their hands are forging ahead in 2014, recruiting partners and crafting a plan of action to address hiring and retention of diverse work forces, youth employment, job training and more.

In the coming year, this page will also examine the role public policy is playing in combating chronic joblessness. Project labor agreements, for example, have proven effective at diversifying publicly supported construction sites. Expect reviews of labor practices on projects like Midtown Rising, College Town, the Port of Rochester, the downtown transit center and the iconic Sibley Building.

In addition, the board will check in on efforts to smooth the classroom-to-workplace transition and budding initiatives like the Regional Economic Development Council's Opportunity Agenda and Multiple Pathways to Middle Skills Jobs plans. The continued development of Eastman Business Park can also change the lives of the disenfranchised among us.

Opening job opportunities can spread desperately needed stability.

## Education

The City School District has no excuse for not moving the needle on student outcomes in 2014. With Superintendent Bolgen Vargas firmly in place there should be no distracting leadership debates — the likes of which have paralyzed progress in the past. And the board itself stayed intact following November's election. That former board President Malik Evans has handed the baton to Van White is hardly a stride-breaking transition.

Good. Because the need for change is urgent. The district cannot continue to score state-worst levels on student proficiency and see a mere 10 percent of its graduates leave school college-ready. Not only is that unfair to students — many of whom need a quality education as a ticket out of the cycle of poverty — but as a practical matter, state Education Commissioner John King has made it clear if progress isn't quickly forthcoming, significant state-level response could be.

That makes it put-up-or-shut-up time for the district. And it makes the input of new Mayor Lovely Warren all the more vital.

As leaders in the Unite Rochester initiative, Warren and Evans should join other school officials in forging creative partnerships. Recent efforts to advocate for expanding BOCES services to city students are an example of needed collaboration. White has ideas for city-suburban schools partnerships; existing programs like Urban-Suburban should be strengthened; and local colleges, which Vargas recently suggested could oversee some city schools, need to be at the table. All initiatives must be pursued with a back-to-basics eye toward strengthening foundations in city schools. Truancy and absenteeism must be curtailed among students; literacy must be universal.

Most importantly, improvement must be immediate.

## Justice

Among people of color, across virtually all economic spectrums, there is a strong sense that they're treated as exceptions when it comes to the constitutional guarantees of liberty and justice for all.

Like elsewhere around the country, such cynicism exists here in the Rochester region because of a shameful national history of legalized injustices. No question, there have been dramatic improvements in the criminal justice and public safety systems. There are more African-American and Hispanic police officers than ever, for example. Still, more must be done.

That should be obvious from, say, the way black people viewed the arrest last summer of a black woman by a white police officer who used questionable force. Or imagine being a black defendant facing a jury of mostly white people, whose knowledge of black people may be based solely on media.

And just how comfortable might it be as a black defendant given the negative perceptions and stereotypes about black people, and having to rely on often overworked, mostly white prosecutors and public defenders to represent your interests. Don't forget, too, that most likely the presiding courtroom judge will be white.

Of course there are fair-minded white people in the criminal justice system and in police work. But negative perceptions can be a two-way street. That's why there was outrage among mostly black people after the Trayvon Martin verdict last year, and after a video of Brenda Hardaway's arrest in Rochester went viral.

This page believes that concerned community leaders and citizens working together on these problems can speed up the rate of improvements that can finally help make liberty and justice for all a reality in Rochester.

## Housing

None of the problems that contribute to widespread racial and socioeconomic inequities in Rochester exist in a vacuum.

So it is no surprise that the lack of quality, affordable housing in the region is exacerbated by one problem (high rates of city unemployment) and, in turn, contributes mightily to others (poor academic performance among city students and the utterly high degree of segregation of the county).

Tackling persistent disparities in housing thus touches on issues affecting Rochester's economically disadvantaged residents across the board.

Housing discrimination was outlawed by the 1968 Fair Housing Act but, as is often the case when it comes to civil rights, practices made illegal on the books live on in less-blatant ways. The result: A recent analysis by the Rochester Area Community Foundation found Rochester's poorest residents more heavily clustered than almost anywhere else in the country, with 47 percent of city residents living in neighborhoods of extreme poverty.

The Rochester Housing Authority has rightly made increasing its inventory of properties a top priority.

Now, more elected leaders must step up to encourage and welcome more affordable housing in their communities, as Gates Supervisor Mark Assini has done.

And national leaders must shore up federal Section 8 housing voucher funds, which have been repeatedly slashed over the past five years.

And, of course, more living-wage jobs in the region would provide more opportunity for the unemployed to seek better housing.

Poverty has chained too many Rochester residents to a life of hardship. The housing link of this chain must be broken.