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Downtown Sanford
(919) 708-5100



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Equity task force makes recommendations to city council

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By *Richard Sullins* | richard@rantnc.com

“There is no part of our city that is not redeemable. Those areas can come back,” former Sanford Director of Planning and Development Robert Bridwell said during his portion of the Equity Task Force’s report to the City Council during a workshop on November 9.

The 46-page report was presented by Bishop Charles Mellette, founder and senior pastor of Christian Provision Ministries, and many of the 18 members who served as part of the group. The document is the culmination of a year-long effort that included consultations with local and regional experts in the development of a blueprint for social change in six main areas.

They include wages and income, criminal justice reform, housing and home ownership, communication and community responsibility, leadership and inclusion, and education and health.

The Task Force was appointed by Mayor Chet Mann and the council just over a year ago to identify community needs and recommend solutions that it considered to be critical to the health and well-being of the city. During the past 12 months, it held public meetings and forums, conducted research and surveys, and collaborated with municipal and community groups to develop recommendations for change.

The report and its findings were received enthusiastically.

“I was very impressed and happy with their work. The quality and experience levels of the task force was off the chart,” Mann said.

Mellette told the council the highest priority area of concern among Sanford and Lee County residents is the need for higher-paying employment. U.S. Census data shows the median household income for the past 12 months among white families in Lee County is \$61,250 while among African American families median household income is less than half that amount, at \$27,373. Hispanics fall between those extremes, with a median income of \$46,083.

That same disparity can be seen in the percentage of persons living on or below the poverty line. Among whites, that number is 9.5 percent. More than twice that percentage of Hispanics (19.3) live in poverty, while the percentage of African Americans living in poverty in Lee County is one in every four (24.8).

The Task Force recommended that the city recruit for its leadership and employment positions in underrepresented communities, finding that 80 percent of the current City Hall staff is white. It also recommended the creation of an orientation program to city services, boards, and commissions, and that grants to new industries would be contingent on proof of equitable hiring practices and racial and ethnic diversity in the workplace.

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Veteran defense attorney Fred Webb presented the group's findings and recommendations on criminal justice. A key suggestion would be a change in Sanford Police Department policy to increase the number of foot patrols instead of driving patrols and spending non-enforcement time in neighborhoods in collaborations with local partners. Webb believes that having officers visible in communities at times when they are not present to carry out an enforcement action will go a long way in making communities safer places to live.

A key strategy for addressing the numbers of young people who get involved in criminal activity is to get them engaged in more productive pursuits and Webb reiterated an idea that seems to come up every so often – investing in after-school recreation. The Task Force recommended the creation of a Youth Center for recreation and mentoring programs in three possible locations: O.T. Sloan Park on Bragg Street; downtown Jonesboro; or the Kendale Shopping Center.

“There are not enough opportunities for adolescents ages 12 to 17 in Sanford and Lee County,” Webb said. “These three areas would be among the most impactful locations where we could begin making these changes for young people.”

But if any real change is to take place in making Sanford and Lee County more equitable places to live, Webb said “it is absolutely essential that action be taken to decriminalize poverty here.”

The report suggests that the city explore a collaboration with Lee County to establish a program that would eliminate traffic court debt and restore driver's licenses, reduce the use of cash bail, and eliminate incarceration in order to pay fines and fees.

As of February 2021, 3,078 people in Lee County had their licenses suspended because of unpaid traffic fines, meaning that they are unable to drive to work, support their families, buy their groceries, and be productive citizens. 48 percent of those cases are among African Americans, 21.6 percent are Hispanics, and 26.5 percent are white. 78 percent of all bonds issued within the county are for misdemeanors. Webb said that similar programs have been created in Wake and Durham counties with the assistance of the N.C. Justice Center.

“It just makes good sense for a county like ours to establish a policy that we don’t want people locked up in order to pay for fines and fees,” he said.

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But perhaps nowhere are racial and ethnic disparities more apparent than in home ownership. The Task Force found that 68 percent of white families own their home in Sanford, compared to 38 percent of Latinos and just 36 percent of black families. Bridwell said that this circumstance is not because of a lack of effort.

“The city has not been negligent in its efforts regarding housing. In fact, it has made many commendable efforts to provide affordable housing since the decades of the 1950s and 1960s,” he said. “Minimum housing has always been a high priority here. But we can do better. We must do better, because there is no greater measure of a life well-lived than owning our own home.”

The report recommends that the city create a Livable Housing Initiative with bond issues and or general funds to support and attract innovative affordable housing development through infrastructure funding of water and sewer, curb and gutter, streets, sidewalks, open space, parks, and community facilities. Initial target areas for improvements would include East Sanford, Woodland Avenue, Washington Avenue, and Jonesboro.

The importance of good communication between the city and its citizens came up in several recommendations. The report cited the need to go beyond just social media, though, saying that things like in-person outreach in neighborhoods where people live may be among the most effective ways to reach those with limited or no access to the digital realm. There is a particular need for bilingual communication from the city in both online and print form regarding public meetings, as well as a need for skilled interpreters in many cases.

To assure that equity among its citizens becomes a way of life in Sanford, the Task Force’s final recommendations were for the creation of a staff position to oversee the implementation of the Equity Action Plan and its successors, and for the creation of a City of Sanford Equity Advisory Board.

Mayor Pro Tempore Byron Buckels, a member of the Equity Task Force, says that the work of assessing each of the report's recommendations has begun.

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“The first step from the council was to assign a staff member to oversee the work of the recommendations, in which we did identify Tuesday night at the workshop meeting,” he said. “As far as prioritization, there were also short- and long-term timelines with each recommendation as well. With that being said, I do foresee the council moving forward on several recommendations at the same time.”

Mann said that with the designation of this point person “we will likely have a council follow-up to discuss the recommendations and then go from there.”

Shannon Judd, chief executive officer of the Sanford Housing Authority, provided updates to the council on the status of several projects among its eight rental communities.

The \$8 million renovation project at Matthews Courts is now 75 percent complete, although an extension of its deadline will likely have to be requested because of delays resulting from the COVID pandemic. A notice to proceed with renovations has also been issued for the 226 Linden Avenue property.

Work at Stewart Manor, a 99-apartment high rise located at 500 Dudley Avenue, has also been going slower than expected. Only one of the building's elevators is now in operation and leaks that created mold issues are being addressed. The structure, completed in 1978, is being repainted on the inside. Stewart Manor is presently about 55 percent filled and new tenants are not being moved in until issues are resolved in each apartment.

In addition to supply chain issues, dwindling cash flow is also contributing to the slow pace of the repairs and renovations. Many tenants have not been able to pay their rent for several months because of COVID. Those funds are typically plowed back into the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development budget for reinvestment in public properties and the shortage of rent dollars is having a trickle-down effect project completions. Further