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Sanford equity task force moves forward

By Jasmine Gallup jgallup@sanfordherald.com

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Members of Sanford's new equity task force are making an effort to tackle economic disparities in the African American community, task force liaison and city council member Byron Buckels said Monday.

As manufacturing companies build new facilities in Sanford, one of the task force's goals is to ensure Black residents of Sanford have access to new jobs, Buckels said during the Sanford Area Growth Alliance monthly public policy luncheon.

Buckels outlined how low levels of education, healthcare and economic growth can lead to low income jobs, trapping people in poverty.

He went on to present data showing racial disparities in the county's education and economic systems.

At Central Carolina Community College, for example, about 15% of students are Black, compared to 54.9% who are white and 21.4% who are Hispanic.

Likewise, white students make up more than 50% of the students participating in the county's high school-college dual enrollment program, while Black students make up less than 10%.

Buckels also noted that the disparity in average monthly wages between white and black residents of Lee County has been growing in some sectors since 2000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

In some of the county's largest industries, such as manufacturing, the disparity in wages grew from 25% in 2000 to 39% in 2019. Similarly large disparities, between 30 and 55%, are present in the wholesale trade, transportation, finance, real estate, and waste management industries.

“It really disturbed me to see (those statistics,” Buckels said. “That was a really hard pill for me to swallow.”

Since their first meeting, the equity task force has formed six subcommittees that have met a total of 22 times, Buckels said. The task force has been meeting with other agencies in hopes of cooperating with them to reduce racial disparities, he said.

Buckels said that helping the African American community isn’t only important for Black people in Sanford, but for the city and county as a whole.

“There’s an old saying that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link,” Buckels said. “We know that if that chain breaks, obviously it wouldn’t be able to function the way it needs to. Our city and county is a chain of communities that’s linked together. And what affects one community affects all communities.”

jgallup