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COMMENTARY

Taking an African-American view of 2000

The Year 2000 has begun with optimism and talk of "stepping forward" and "working together." But what really is in store for the region's African-American community? What will 2000 bring that is different from 1999, or, for that matter, 1900?

Not unexpectedly, there are widely divergent opinions within the community. But the consensus seems to be that whatever progress is achieved in 2000 and beyond, it must come from African Americans "stepping forward" and



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Working together."

"I believe that the primary if not sole source of hope for African Americans is in the quest for high quality education for our children," says Jacqueline Morrow, solicitor for the City of Pittsburgh. "Without a better educated race, we will be obsolete in the economies of the 21st century," she says.

"I have watched African Americans in this region petition the government for everything but quality education," says the graduate of Clark University and the University of Pittsburgh law school. "We allow our children to leave school without the reading, writing and critical thinking skills necessary to survive. We survived slavery, we should be able to conquer the SAT."

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PITTSBURGH SOLICITOR

"Being involved in radio broadcasting for over 11 years, I have seen many trends and changes that have occurred in the black community," says Alan L. Lincoln, vice president and general manager of WAMO. "One thing that hasn't changed is our commitment to young people and our communities. Although there are serious problems that we are facing in both areas, I believe that there needs to be more African Americans stepping forward to make a difference."

State Rep. Bill Robinson also sees 2000 as a year for African Americans to do more to help themselves. "The obvious circumstances of African Americans in Allegheny County indicates that while there are specific pockets of poverty and deprivation, a significant portion of the African American populace can be called, and is, middle class based on income, education and social status," he says.

"Thus, the leverage and opportunity that the middle class enjoys in our county dictates African Americans doing even more to create substantive, self sustaining institutions to serve our needs and invest in our future," Robinson added.

Gregory R. Spencer, senior vice president and chief administrative officer, Equitable Resources, says

leadership, new and established, corporate and community, will make the difference.

"The African-American Leadership Directory and Pittsburgh magazine were instrumental in assisting the community at large to recognize the abundance of black leadership talent in our region. There also is broader involvement of African Americans that are sitting at the tables influencing decisions that affect the economic growth of this region," says Spencer.

"However, in the corporate arena, if you look at the 10 largest publicly held companies in Pittsburgh (in terms of revenue) you will find no more than five black corporate executives, and it is not much better at the banks," Spencer continues.

"Types of decisions regarding where purchasing dollars are spent, who receives the coveted assignments that lead to greater career growth and opportunities, are made by the executive group and there just aren't enough blacks sitting at those tables," he says.

Doris Carson Williams, president of the African American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania, also touts economic growth. "The year 2000 will be one of true optimism for African Americans," she says. "I see more business opportunities awaiting themselves to business owners, and more engagement from the corporate community. A stronger united front will make things happen. In some regards, it will be ours for the asking, in other regards, the struggle will continue. Those who remain focused will benefit."

"I am cautiously hopeful for the African-American community in 2000," says Rev. Jason Barr, senior pastor at Macedonia Baptist Church in the Hill District. "My hope is based on increased economic activity in the community, a new political regime in county government and a sense from many that something good is about to happen," he says. "I am also hopeful because in 1999 many African Americans exhibited a modicum of political sophistication by refusing to place their complete political allegiance in the hands of one political party."

But Barr tempers that optimism because, well, Pittsburgh is Pittsburgh. "I am cautious because in the 11 years I have lived in Pittsburgh, I have not sensed a cohesive and/or coherent articulation of a vision for the greater Pittsburgh community. The Scriptures teach that 'where there is no vision, the people perish.' If vision is a picture of a preferred future then I have not seen one emerge, at least from a macro perspective. What I hear more than anything in Pittsburgh is what most people are against, but not a lot about a vision that a critical mass is pushing towards. Amen!"

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