

# Chamber luncheon celebrates America

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By Christian Morrow

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More than 500 local business, government and community leaders joined African American Chamber of Commerce President Doris Carson Williams in "Celebrating America" at the organization's third annual business luncheon Dec. 5.

Held in the 17th floor ballroom of the Omni William Penn Hotel, Williams said "togetherness" is the reason for the chamber's success last year, and for the country's resilience in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"Since 9-11, we have moved from horror, to grief, to anger...but we have done it together," she said.

"Celebrating America is indeed our purpose."

Pittsburgh Mayor Tom Murphy said despite the economic fallout from Sept. 11, the unemployment rate in Pittsburgh has dropped to 3.8 percent.

"For the first time in 50 years, it is below the state average (4.5 percent)," he said.

"I like to think it's because the African American chamber, the city and corporations are committed to working together."

Following the invocation by Rev. Harold Lewis of Calvary Episcopal Church in Shadyside, Williams highlighted some of the chamber's 2001 programs, including the new partnership with the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, a media forum and small business mentoring program.

She then introduced keynote speaker Allegheny County Chief Executive Jim Roddey, who jokingly promised the audience, "As King Henry VIII said to each of his wives, I will



PHOTO BY VENETIA PALM

**CHAMBER MADE**—African-American Chamber of Commerce President Doris Carson Williams poses with guests during the chamber's third annual business luncheon. Left to right: Sylvester Pace, James Williams, Peter Speaks, Joe Williams and Eugene Bentley.

not keep you long."

Roddey described how the events of Sept. 11 gave Americans a new perspective on life.

"We need to stop focusing on our petty, partisan problems and come together for a higher purpose," he said.

"The work of this chamber does that."

Roddey said although the county has grown, it has not always been inclusive.

"We have always had quality of life, but we haven't had quality of opportunity for every citizen in the region," he said.

Roddey called for increased

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workforce development programs so young people can take advantage of thousands of regional jobs available in the health care, technology and manufacturing sectors.

The jobs aren't being filled, Roddey added, because students lack the required reading, writing and math skills.

"And the system we use to pay for these schools has failed," he said.

"If it is not solved, all the work of this chamber will crumble."

Roddey said it was unfair that Duquesne School District, where one mil of tax generates \$16,000, is taxed at a higher rate than Fox Chapel Area School District, where that same mil generates \$1.2 million in revenue.

"A system that penalizes schools for where they are is upside down," he said.

Roddey applauded the chamber's growth

from 28 members three years ago to 300. He also lauded the group for its support of African-American businesses and said he would continue to work with the organization.

In his closing remarks, chamber Chairman Robert Agbede thanked Roddey and all the chamber's members and sponsors, saying they help make America stronger.

"Since last year, our membership is up 51 percent, and our corporate sponsors are up 81 percent," he said.

"Even in the days after 9-11, God has blessed America because he never gives us more than we can bear."

"Today, we are more resolved as a country and more united as a people than ever before," he added. "And this chamber is focused on the future, even as we recall how far we have come."