

Yablonsky keynotes Chamber lunch, cites diversity as a regional challenge

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Hosting more than 300 people at the Omni William Penn Hotel, African American Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Doris Carson Williams thanked the guests for their work and support in partnering with the chamber to forward its mission of increasing opportunities for African-American businesses.



BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS—

Board Chair Samuel Stephenson presents an African American Chamber of Commerce lapel pin to keynote speaker Dennis Yablonsky following address.

"Today we find ourselves served by many outside organizations to forward that mission; the Marcellus Shale Coalition, the Federal Reserve Bank, Allegheny General Hospital with our diabetes series, and the University of Pittsburgh with our Power to Prosper initiative," she said. "These help our members not only with their personal health, but the health, costs and bottom lines of their businesses. It will yield new members as will our traditional partnerships with the corporate community, which is a core association for our members."

The themes of diversity, diversification and cooperation were touched on by other speakers including Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald and Pittsburgh Mayor Luke Ravenstahl.

"We had 500,000 young people Downtown for Light Up Night," said Fitzgerald. "This new vibrancy is bringing new people to the table and generating a diversity we haven't seen in years."

In his keynote address, Allegheny Conference on Community Development CEO Dennis Yablonsky, said that vibrancy goes hand-in-hand with the region's economic success, and vice versa. The region's economic diversity, relying on multiple market sectors such as financial services, manufacturing, Internet technology, medical/educational and now energy, allowed it to be one of only three regions nationally to have recovered from the recession.

Yablonsky's gave a summary of where we've been, where we are and the challenges ahead.

"In 1983, when the steel industry collapsed, we lost 100,000 jobs. Unemployment in Pittsburgh was 18 percent, in McKeesport it was 20 percent and in Beaver, 29 percent," he said. "It took us 30 years to recover, but even now, our unemployment rate is 7.3 percent. The reason is no one of these new market sectors accounts for more than 20 percent of our economy."

The key to much of this success, Yablonsky said, is the advent of public-private partnerships, and operating from a model of “sustainable prosperity” and workforce planning.

“No one does it better than we do here,” he said. “But there are three challenges I see as critical to maintaining this success; infrastructure, workforce development and diversity, and local government structure.”

Infrastructure, he noted, is the work of government. The work of preparing sites for companies to occupy, laying out utility lines, etc. is only part of the problem. Maintaining the public transit, roads and bridges needed to get employees, materials and end products to and from these sites is an even more pressing issue given the poor state of the region’s roads and bridges. The governor and legislature, Yablonsky said, need to address a long-term solution to these issues.

Secondly the workforce needs to improve in terms of both skills and diversity.

“There are 14,000 job open in the Pittsburgh region,” he said. “The number one issue is finding qualified people. Most of these jobs have a Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics component. We have to redo our whole career agenda.”

If the skills aren’t here employers will look elsewhere. Another way to address the lack of skills is to import those who have them, but to do so by importing racially diverse employees. In a global economy, a racially diverse workforce is a benefit—one that has not been adequately addressed here.

“We are the least diverse metro region in the country,” he said. “The average is a 33 percent minority population. Ours is 11 percent. But we can do this.”

Lastly he said, the sheer number of distinct government entities in the region and state are unsustainable, and some level of reform or assimilation is needed.

“We have 2316 government entities,” he said. “We have 3,000 pension plans in the state, which represents 25 percent of the national total, and 70 percent of those have fewer than 10 employees.”

These issues are solvable, he said, if we work together to solve them.

Another highlight to the luncheon was the chamber’s recognition of Rev. Dr. Harold Lewis, who retired as rector of Calvary Episcopal Church after serving 16 years.

(Send comments to cmorrow@newpittsburghcourier.com .)