

New Pittsburgh Courier

Chamber/Conference make for engaging PowerBreakfast

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By Christian Morrow



MAKING THE CASE FOR DIVERSITY—Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce President Dewitt Peart tells the PowerBreakfast audience that the region will fail without increasing diversity.

Because, as president and CEO Doris Carson Williams always notes, the African American Chamber of Commerce is about engagement and [increasing business](#) opportunities for its members, its most recent PowerBreakfast provided such an opportunity.

What was billed as a presentation by Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce President Dewitt Peart, turned into a lively exchange of ideas on the region's future, because Peart is also the executive vice president for economic [development](#) and public affairs for the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, which is in the middle of formulating its strategic plan for the next three years.

"Our number one issue is [workforce development](#) for the growing oil and gas, financial, and high tech sectors. One of our biggest problems is not enough real estate, hotel space, office space and housing," he said. "And if we don't diversify our economy, we will fail."

Peart said we need to attracting a new and diverse work force because even if we managed to get all the [unemployed](#) people here now employed, it wouldn't be enough to meet the coming demand for skilled workers because the post-baby boom birth rates will not [make up](#) for the baby boomers retiring in the next 15 years. We're going to be short by 140,000 people.

Peart also highlighted some of the regional achievements the conference promoted in recent years including the G-20 summit, that state transportation bill approved last year, and new development partnerships in McKees Rocks and Wilkinsburg.



GATHERING INPUT—Allegheny Conference Vice President Bill Flanagan listens to African American Chamber members' voice their preferred focus for the conference's new three-year plan.

"Since 2007 we've had 302 'wins' in the region. A 'win' is recruiting a new business or expanding an existing one," he said. "The entire state of Ohio had 300."

Looking forward, Peart said he expects big things on the 200-acre Almano site in Hazelwood and the 28-acre former Civic Arena site downtown.

There's nothing like that anywhere in the country," he said.

He then turned the presentation over to conference Executive Vice President for Corporate Relations Bill Flanagan, who after noting in a [PowerPoint](#) presentation all the things the region needs to "energize the future economy," asked chamber members what they think should be the conference's focus.

Williams said more utilization of [local](#) small and minority-owned firms by developers and those in the growth industries.

"A lot of our members tell me they do much more business elsewhere," she said. Others mentioned the disconnect between young people and jobs, that they leave for places like New York City, Atlanta. Still others mentioned infrastructure—particularly getting into and out of the city from the airport.

"Even Manhattan is easier," said James Cooper of Sterling Contracting. "I know a developer who came here to look at a proposal. He got stuck in traffic coming from the airport, and turned around and went back."

Noting that African-Americans in Pittsburgh have a 25 percent [unemployment rate](#) and only 40 percent are graduating from high school, retired [Heinz](#) executive Chauncey Smith said he would like to see a focus on "those who've been left behind" in all the recent development.

Following the exchange of ideas, Flanagan and Catherine DeLoughry, conference vice president of communications, collected them into a list and asked the audience to vote on which two the conference should focus—minority business engagement and increasing diversity [hiring](#) and retention tied with the most votes, infrastructure was third.