

Diversity as our Strength: A Community Conversation in Rockdale County Meeting Summary

Tuesday, October 18, 2006
11:30 am. – 1:30 pm
Georgia International Horse Park – Carriage Room
Conyers, Georgia

Welcome and Opening Remarks

Roy Middle brooks, Chairman, Rockdale County, welcomed all present. He acknowledged the presence of Ms. Alicia Philipp, President of the Community Foundation, Dr. Samuel T. King, Superintendent of the Rockdale County school system, Mr. Richard Autry, Assistant Superintendent of the Rockdale County school system. He stated that one of the things the county needs to understand are future trends that will impact growth and the need to involve citizens of different cultures in planning. After those remarks, he introduced Chick Krautler, Director of the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC).

Mr. Krautler provided an overview of the ARC. This is the planning agency responsible for an array of programs including transportation, forecasting, population estimates, human services and aging programs in the ten-county region of Atlanta that includes Rockdale County. In the 1990s ARC began doing a series of snapshots of fast growing ethnic groups in the metro area. After the 2000 Census the agency decided to update the snapshots, recently expanding the publication series into a new program called “Global Atlanta Works.” This initiative is supported in part by The Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta. The fastest growing segments of the population are 3 minority groups: Hispanics, African Americans, and Asians. Combined, these groups are creating new minority-majority demographic compositions in a number of counties and impacting decision making in terms of regional planning and outreach. ARC needs to hear from all citizens for input to plans for transportation, land use and other programs. It is also difficult to identify the leadership in populations that the agency is not used to engaging. This is the premise for developing the Global Atlanta Works program and for engaging in conversations in diverse communities.

Discussion and Next Steps

Attendees were asked to introduce themselves and state why they accepted the invitation to the conversation. Many want to know more about the changing demographics that are occurring in the county, the impacts of these changes to the educational system and to the future of the younger generation; others seek ways to address the challenges of diversity by learning new strategies and opportunities, as well as to embrace and celebrate diversity through understanding and respecting other cultures. Many of the comments, thoughts and suggestions were repeated by attendees. What follows is a summary of the discussion and recommendations for next steps:

School System:

In the Rockdale school system there are 16,000 students. Over 60% of the student body is minorities. There are many different cultures coming in to the schools and the focus should be to reach out to all of our students. A problem that we have is the pace of diversification. From 2000 – 2006 there has been a jump from 8% - 65% minorities in the student body. How do we slow the growth? We can not. Considering these significant increases, the level of education received in schools is still one of the best.

In the school system it is also very difficult to handle a class with different ethnicities. In order to embrace diversity you have to understand diversity, but the fear is very real. Prejudice is taught, prejudice is learned; you are not born with prejudice in your heart. Our small children play and interact with each other everyday not worrying about race or creed. It is the adults that have the learning curve. For example, when some people would hear someone speaking with an accent, they close up. They stop listening to what is being said. And while it can be OK to socialize with people you know for many years at public functions (e.g. school, work, church) you are still not invited to their homes. Diversity is about understanding and respect and we need to celebrate it.

What is the school system doing to address issues around diversity? They started by having discussions with community stakeholders (community, parents, and faculty) to get them involved and to buy into the concept that ‘diversity is a strength’. They began analyzing the changes and growth and are just now scratching the surface in a first year implementation of a 5-year strategic plan. The demographics of every school are different. Each school has a different set of strategies specific to its particular site. The school system has begun to discuss what it means to have ‘highly qualified’ staff. Professional development is still a principal challenge for staff, i.e. to effectively connect teachers and faculty with its diverse student body to embrace the uniqueness of every member and assure the highest achievement levels possible. There is a lack of knowledge of what it means to be a minority. More discussions like this is necessary.

Other topics discussed:

- *What really is diversity?* This needs to be discussed. It’s not about what color you are, it is about understanding and respecting each other’s individuality.
- *Building trust* - The faith community spends a great deal of time building trust with new ethnicities becoming members of churches. It is wise to listen to each other and doing that is our biggest challenge. Immigrants are heavily involved in service and he is making sure minorities move into the service comfortably.
- *‘Exit Plans’* - People already have them in place (e.g. if parents cannot get their kids into certain schools, their plan is to exit the county). This is a concern.

- *Stereotyping* - The caliber of people should be a primary focus rather than what race they are. Teaching people about different cultures should help dispel some of the beliefs associated with stereotyping.
- *Marketing* - A lot of NAACP members are transferring from one county to another. Additionally there is a lot of opportunity to start small businesses in the county. The challenge for small businesses, however, is visibility. It is much harder in Hispanic and Asian communities. They are finding more lucrative opportunities in places like Decal and Fulton.
- *Hispanics/Latinos* - The Hispanic/Latino community in Rockdale is growing but operating as a community within a community.

It is difficult for municipal staff to communicate with some Hispanics or Latinos because of the language barrier with the many different native tongues. This translates into high levels of fear and distrust by this community especially of persons in authority. This communication barrier is also compounded by the fact that they may not understand how to navigate the system. This fear/lack of communication is a national trend across institutions.

It is also important for the broader community to understand that members of this community do not usually ask questions needed to help serve them. The communication process is assisted however by non-English speaking customers who may have children with them that can speak English.

- *White flight* - It has been happening for at least 6-7 years. Residents are moving to Social Circle, Walton County, and other outlying counties. Much of this flight is based on the changing community, and many use the school system as their excuse for leaving. Additionally, people need to understand that some people just don't want to live with other subgroups.

Wrap-Up and Next Steps

Alicia Philipp stated the Community Foundation is a grant making foundation that have funded programs such as Intergroup Relations, an innovative neighborhood and community project that work to improve race and ethnic relations between recent immigrants and longtime residents. She advised attendees to work together to build trust. When you are starting a committee, for example, you need to consciously think about who you place on that committee. Get to know lots of people to get different talents at the table.

Chairman Middlebrooks suggested that they think about what was discussed today and then possibly meeting again for next steps. He ended with a quote by Jane Goodall who

said that every individual matters, every individual has a role to play, and that every citizen has a right to be here.

As a consideration for next steps, Chick Krautler described diversity councils that the Cobb County commission and Henry County school system established.