

U of M, Northsiders seek common ground

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by Anna Pratt

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Participants hope for a mutually beneficial agreement

As in previous community meetings that were convened throughout December last year, attendees at an April 3 town hall forum at the Minneapolis Urban League were asked to prioritize various Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) strategies. These provisions fell under the categories of education, economic development, family and community health, and a community research and review board.

Many people leaned toward an automatic university enrollment program for the top 15 percent of high school seniors who live on the North Side.

People favored having a U of M extension and recruitment office on the North Side; ideas like offering for-credit and not-for-credit courses, setting up an endowment fund, and providing academic enrichment classes were also popular. The notion of installing a think tank got the least votes.

People responded positively to ideas like the U of M helping Northside children to pursue health careers, establishing a lifestyle center, identifying health disparities and reducing environmental hazards.

Among other things, residents suggested that the University Northside Partnership (UNP) work to strengthen the area's small and existing businesses, develop a community ownership and economic development center, bring forward people to help with housing procurement, develop youth business seminars, and create an internship program.

Bruce Scroggins, who attended the meeting, said the CBA has potential to be worthwhile for the community. To carry it out, it's important that the community's vision and the U of M's ideas intersect, he said.

"Often, organizations come in and say they want to partner with you, but they come in with an agenda," said Scroggins. "There's a lot of reasons in the minority community to have distrust and disbelief in what they have seen allowed under the guise of medical practice."

Scroggins said he would like to read a scientific proposal for the child and family center so as to discuss the options intelligently. "I'm not opposed; I just want to find out what the U wants to do."

Scroggins is also wondering how the CBA will be enforced and what incentive partners

would have to agree to such an enforcement mechanism. “If it doesn’t have enforcement, what’s the point?”

A tool for making change

Roger Banks, a research and policy analyst for the State Council on Black Minnesotans who was also at the meeting, said he hopes the CBA brings out an “integrated approach to community mobilization and development.” The CBA should not simply make demands on the U, but rather bring together a whole host of stakeholders to do their part.

Banks advocates for the development of sound research that sheds light on race and ethnicity. “We need research that benefits us, and we need to understand the results and monitor the testing to make sure it does no harm to its human subjects,” he said. “We can’t rely just on rhetoric and promises as we have in the past.”

A community research review board could provide oversight to the mental health research, especially as it has to do with people of color. The CBA is a “very good tool to develop coalitions to resolve issues. It can assist in making significant change,” Banks said.

Unknowns and uncertainties

Formed to address some of those questions is the university’s new Urban Research and Outreach/Engagement Center (UROC). It is based on the school’s six existing Research and Outreach Centers (ROCs) across the state addressing the needs of agriculture, forestry and rural communities, according to Irma McClaurin, executive director of UROC.

UROC should be distinguished from UNP. In other words, “UNP was the way in which partners and different constituents were brought to the table — the convening mechanism, if you will — and UROC is intended to anchor the university’s presence in North Minneapolis and be the conduit through which outreach activities and programs flow,” McClaurin informed us via email.

McClaurin has said that other kinds of agreements might be preferable to a CBA. Cautioning that the U of M hasn’t taken any stance on the CBA, which hasn’t been formally presented to the school, she said, “CBAs are legal binding documents, and given that there are multiple stakeholders, it is not clear how such a legal document could be executed under the auspices of the UNP, which is not a 501(c)3, but an alliance organization,” she said.

It’s unclear exactly how a CBA would impact each partner that is a party to the UNP. The extent to which each partner would be expected to deliver on the CBA is unknown, she said.

McClaurin pointed out that not every stakeholder has been involved in the discussion.

“The CBA is something they want to have with the U, but it’s UNP. Who would sign on behalf of the community?”

At this early stage, she said she has noticed that some objectives in the draft CBA fall out of the U of M’s scope. “We have an educational mission. We’re an educational institution.”

For example, the notion of granting automatic U of M enrollment to the top 15 percent of students who live on the North Side brings in other legal issues. As for the idea of providing insurance information to Northside residents, perhaps that is an arrangement the U can be involved in, but it’s not a service provider, she said.

Some of the wants expressed in the CBA, however, will naturally occur. McClaurin feels certain that UROC will yield economic development, for instance. Going forward, “There needs to be a clear understanding of what the U can and can’t do,” she said. “We’re excited and interested. Our goal is to be on the same page.”

Anna Pratt welcomes reader responses to annaprattjournalist@gmail.com.