

Democrat and Chronicle

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\$1.50 NEWSSTAND

Effort against racism unveiled

■ City is teaming up diverse leaders to share perspectives.

BY STAFF WRITER

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Wegmans Food Markets President Danny Wegman is a white man. Rochester City Councilwoman Gladys Santiago is a Hispanic woman.

Lawrence Hargrave, interim co-executive minister at American Baptist Churches, is a black man.

And Rochester is using these and other community leaders as the first wave in a new effort to tackle racism and the area's cultural divides.

The city's Task Force on Race & Ethnicity yesterday unveiled its plan to partner community leaders — Wegman, Santiago, Hargrave and dozens of others — so they can socialize and get to know each other as individuals.

"They will not be talking about racism, per se," said Timothy Johnson, professor of social work at Roberts Wesleyan College and chairman of the city task force. "It's getting to know the personal types of things . . . about each other.



Danny Wegman

Wegmans' president joins the city's panel on race.



Paul Yu

President of the State University College at Brockport.



Gladys Santiago

Rochester civic activist and leader aids work.

"As people become familiar with each other . . . the lines that divide begin to weaken and disappear."

And as people get to know members of other races, he added, they get a better sense of what it is

Task force

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like to be black or Hispanic or white.

In coming weeks, the community leaders who have signed up for the initiative will be buddied up. They then will meet once every couple weeks or so and simply talk.

By starting with a few visible community leaders, the idea could trickle down to the public.

"There's a saying — 'As goes the king so go the people,'" said Timothy Johnson.

Later this year comes the second phase, with the effort spreading to people in middle management positions. Eventually, it will open up to the community at large.

"Some people may want to dismiss this as a frivolous gesture," Mayor Johnson said. But by starting with community leaders, "we expect average, everyday citizens to want to join and do this."

The mayor established the task force more than a year ago to come up with ideas to increase racial harmony locally. This plan, the Bi-Racial Partnerships for Community Progress, is the first fruit of the work of the task force.

So far, 78 community leaders — including State University College at

Brockport President Paul Yu and Salahuddin Malik, a major voice in the local Muslim community — have signed on to the effort.

"We expect other names will be added to the list," Mayor Johnson said.

Nearly a decade ago, the Urban League unveiled a similar concept — the Communitywide Initiative to Reduce Racial Polarization in the Greater Rochester Community. Thousands of people signed pledge cards.

But the mayor said that once he left the Urban League for City Hall, "that campaign essentially floundered."

This time, he said, City Hall will have a staffer working on this. And community leaders will put the resources of their organizations into the effort.

Rochester is not the only city to add promoting racial harmony to its services of police protection and street plowing.

The National League of Cities — representing more than 1,700 cities — has made racial divisions one of its top issues.

"Rochester is a progressive city in terms of its history," Timothy Johnson said. "But Rochester is not a city isolated from the rest of the country and the rest of the world. Racism is alive and well here." □

For more on the National League of Cities effort, click on the "Undoing Racism Agenda" icon at:

www.nlc.org