

Greensboro aims to pair leaders, improve race relations

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GREENSBORO, N.C. -- Mayor Keith Holliday announced an effort to pair 180 top civic leaders across racial lines and encourage them to share experiences in order to improve understanding of other races.

The project will be known as the Greensboro Bicentennial Mosaic Partnerships Project, patterned after a similar project launched in Rochester, N.Y. The Greensboro effort will be one of many to improve the city in advance of its 200th birthday in 2008, Holliday said.

"As good a job we're doing on race relations, I think everyone agrees we can be doing better," Holliday said.

Rochester has a similar percentage of minorities and is roughly the same size as Greensboro.

Led by city staffers and a Rochester consulting firm, the 90 pairs of "established city leaders" will begin meeting in November. The idea is for the relationships those leaders make to filter down to the community.

The participants, who will be picked over the next two months, commit to meet about once a month with each other or in small groups to socialize and discuss racial issues.

Rochester Mayor Bill Johnson said the program he helped start required a lot of work but was successful in forcing people to discuss race relations.

"The biggest issue is that people don't like to talk about it and they don't like to talk across racial lines," Johnson said.

Holliday said the program was initially limited to top civic leaders because they set an example for people under their charge. If the program was open to the public, those leaders might decide not to participate, he said.

Holliday said the program wasn't a reaction to the Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project, which he has previously criticized for being too divisive. That group seeks to resolve racial tensions stemming from a 1979 shooting that killed five protesters at an anti-Ku Klux Klan march through an east Greensboro public housing community.

The mayor's effort will be funded and directed by the community's established institutions and is limiting participation to top leaders of civic groups. Leaders of the reconciliation project are taking the opposite strategy, hoping to work with the wider community to face racial problems.

The Rev. Zeb Holler, who helped organize the Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project, said the community has to heal the wounds of its past.

"Truth is the great healer that is greatly feared," Holler said. "If you don't deal with the past, it's still on you."

Johnson, who is Rochester's first black mayor, said critics will argue that racism isn't the problem that it was before.

"Just because you don't have lynchings and mob scenes that you had before doesn't mean that everything is better," Johnson said.

Three years after the program began, Johnson said there hasn't been a huge change in race relations, but there are important relationships that didn't exist before.

"We're making small steps forward," he said.