

Downtown Leadership & Management: Building Racial Equity and Opportunity in Downtown

Presented by Downtown Grand Rapids Inc.

A Critical Moment for Downtown to Lead

Strengthening racial relations and equity today stands as a top priority across the United States. While events in cities such as Ferguson, Chicago and Baltimore have thrust policing and racism back into the national spotlight, the thoughtful work of some national equity leaders has revealed the power of a more intentional and effective equity-driven growth model to strengthen the economy, neighborhoods and community.

Grand Rapids, MI is a microcosm of the challenges and opportunities now confronting the nation. On one hand, signs of renaissance abound in the City. Cranes and construction dot the Downtown skyline. The city is on track to reestablish its pre-recession population level and now claims one of the nation's strongest real estate markets. Forbes declares the regional economy, anchored by Downtown, one of the fastest-growing in the U.S.

This rapid expansion, however, is contrasted by a costly degree of deepening racial inequity and exclusion. Poverty, for example, grew faster across greater Grand Rapids in recent years than it did in Detroit. The unemployment rate exceeds 25 and 50 percent for Hispanic and Black citizens, respectively, in the city's urban neighborhoods. Even in Downtown Grand Rapids, generally perceived as affluent, 66 percent of residents earn less than the area median income. Indeed, Forbes also recently ranked Grand Rapids one of the worst cities for African Americans to pursue economic opportunity.

Clearly conventional economic recovery and growth is not sufficient to solve the persistent racial and ethnic inequity that exists in the nation's cities – a reality Grand Rapids and a growing number of communities increasingly understand. What's more, the demography of metro Grand Rapids, like the U.S. as a whole, continues to grow more racially and ethnically diverse. The Latino population in particular is projected to comprise 25 percent of the city's total population by 2040.

As the community grows more diverse, Downtown Grand Rapids must evolve to appeal to and serve a variety of diverse interests to continue strengthening its economy and culture. To help lead locally through these critical, complex and often divisive issues, Downtown Grand Rapids Inc. (DGRI) recently defined a new place-management and city building approach that aspires to guide the development of a Downtown that's increasingly diverse, welcoming and economically inclusive of people from all walks of life.

This submission summarizes the key elements of this new collaborative strategy and several key results from Year One implementation. DGRI believes this model to strengthen racial inclusion and equity is replicable in – and holds important positive ramifications for – Downtowns, urban neighborhoods and cities across the country.

Towards an Equity-Driven Growth Model

DGRI is the organization responsible for city building and place management in Michigan's second largest city. In February 2014, DGRI initiated the first visioning and planning process in 20 years for Downtown Grand Rapids. With the previous plan for growth effectively complete, the time had come for a fresh conversation about the future of the Downtown neighborhood.

One top priority was ensuring a diverse range of people felt welcome, comfortable and heard sharing their perspective about the future of Downtown. An important early process step, then, was outlining and committing to what would become the most inclusive planning and public engagement effort in the city's history. The result was a two-year process – *GR Forward* – that hosted approximately 150 meetings and brought together more than 4,400 Grand Rapidians who collectively imagined a new future for Downtown Grand Rapids.

Like many community plans today, *GR Forward* identified demand for more retail, parks, transit and housing. But the robust public engagement also revealed

widespread concern about access to opportunities for everyone to share in Downtown's future services, amenities and prosperity. Put plainly, a broad swath of the community, including many from historically marginalized communities, believed they weren't welcome or didn't belong Downtown. What's more, the process brought to light new information that inequity weakens the economy. Indeed, the Grand Rapids economy would generate \$3.3 billion more annually absent existing racial income gaps based on research by the National Equity Atlas.

What's different about *GR Forward* is that – for the first time that DGRI is aware of in an American Downtown plan– the vision, goals and strategy puts racial equity front and center. The plan frames the compelling case that stemming widening inequality and achieving greater equity and inclusion are fundamental to the future health and success of the Downtown neighborhood, as well as the broader city and region. The plan prioritizes such strategies as expanding access to high quality public education, more intentionally recruiting marginalized communities into the decision-making process and other important determinants of equity.

What's more, the plan is oriented for action – defining a series of specific racial equity goals, with related strategies, timelines for implementation and measurable accountability targets that ultimately frame a collective, partner-driven approach designed to yield significant results.

Highlights of Year One Implementation Outcomes

The Grand Rapids City Commission in December 2015 unanimously approved *GR Forward* as an amendment to the City Master Plan. Based on the community alignment and genuine partnerships seeded and strengthened through the engagement process, *GR Forward's* equity agenda has nurtured more focused leadership for translating ideas into action. Year One implementation success includes, but is not limited to, the following outcomes:

GOAL: Cultivate an equity perspective in civic governance

Year One Outcome:

- *Diversified DGRI Leadership Network (100+ citizen advisors) to better reflect the community's diversity of age, race, gender, sexual orientation, expertise and geographic residence.*

GOAL: Foster racially and ethnically diverse business ownership.

Year One Outcomes:

- *Enabled the DGRI Tax Increment Finance tool for the first time to support minority- and women-owned business development.*
- *Passed Pilot Food Truck Ordinance to expand opportunities for culinary entrepreneurs. One black-owned business already expanding.*

GOAL: Create a more welcoming and inclusive Downtown

Year One Outcomes:

- *Partnered with 3rd-party research institute to poll public opinion and established first-ever baseline measure of how people perceive Downtown as a welcoming and inclusive place. DGRI will repeat survey annually to track the effectiveness of future interventions.*
- *Attracted the fledgling Grand Rapids African-American Museum and Archives to Downtown. DGRI will release a Downtown Black History Walking Tour in June, 2017.*
- *Launched event management program and trained 220+ event producers to help expand the range of Downtown events appealing to diverse audiences.*
- *Achieved an 80% increase in nonwhite attendance at the DGRI-produced Movies in the Park event series through community partnership and more inclusive programming.*
- *Produced GR Forward Together video celebrating the city's rich diversity of people and help change the perception of who's welcome and active Downtown. (162,750 views to date)*

GOAL: Attract a diverse population to the Downtown neighborhood.

Year One Outcome:

- *Modified the zoning code (increased allowable heights and eliminated parking minimums) to reduce development costs and keep housing attainable for a diverse range of people and families.*

Through this and other ongoing work, DGRI is demonstrating for peer Downtown organizations how to successfully lead the design and implementation of place-based approaches to achieving greater racial equity and inclusion in American communities.