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Charlotte CEOs unite to tackle thorny community issues

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A group of 25 top executives in Charlotte has started a leadership council aimed at tackling and improving issues such as income inequality, transportation and education.

[Lynn Good](#), [Tom Skains](#) and [Michael Tarwater](#) — the top-ranking executives at **Duke Energy** (NYSE:DUK), **Piedmont Natural Gas** (NYSE:PNY) and **Carolinas HealthCare System**, respectively — co-founded the group.

Good has been named head of the Charlotte Executive Leadership Council for an initial two-year term.

The three CEOs began discussing a business leadership group in 2014, just before the annual Charlotte Chamber inter-city trip went to Minneapolis.

While participating in the chamber visit, the CEOs learned about [the Itasca Project, a group of business leaders who banded together in 2003 to tackle similar quality-of-life issues](#) in the Twin Cities. [Richard Davis](#), CEO of U.S. Bank in Minneapolis, leads the Itasca Project and advised Good and her co-founders on starting a comparable executive group in Charlotte. (We will, for the moment, [skip the separate matter of how a company's, or a CEO's, image could help or hurt such campaigns.](#))

The Minneapolis group includes the mayors of the Twin Cities and the Minnesota governor. In Charlotte, no political leaders will be involved.

"The council believes a private sector leadership group is preferable at this time," an outline of the group's formation states. "The private sector has not had a forum for such discussions, creating a gap in our community."

Consider this: Those glory days recalled by long-term Charlotte residents about the small group of CEOs who propelled the Queen City into spending public and private money on professional sports,

museums and a range of education and transportation projects are, and have been, gone for many years. Duke's Bill Lee left in 1994, followed three years later by Rolfe Neill (*The Charlotte Observer*) and then bankers Ed Crutchfield (First Union, 2000) and Hugh McColl Jr. (Bank of America) in 2001.

Even the much stormier era of the two Kens — Thompson (CEO at Wachovia) and Lewis (CEO at BofA) — ended in 2008 and 2009, respectively.

"I think as we began to study the idea of coming together, we saw great success from other communities, like Minneapolis and other urban areas," Good told me Thursday. "At this stage, I'd say we're in the study phase. ... We've looked at the economic health of the community. We've looked at issues around upward mobility. We've talked about education. And we would expect that study and learning to continue for a period of time and our voice will be heard when we think it's appropriate to weigh in."

Michael Marsicano, head of Foundation For The Carolinas, is helping shape the focus areas for the council and providing administrative assistance. For the moment, Good and her co-founders and the rest of the CEOs enlisted have no budget, no expenses and no employees. In addition to seeking advice from Minneapolis' Itasca Project, the new leadership group tapped The Lee Institute to study and analyze similar organizations in other cities for more examples of what might work in Charlotte.

In the coming months, the leadership council expects to get a firmer grasp on what issues it will take on — and which ones it won't. During an interview Thursday morning in a 48th-floor conference room at Duke Energy's headquarters uptown, Good, Skains and Tarwater said several times they want to be judicious in what they pursue and make certain they aren't duplicating the efforts of other organizations.

Eventually, they expect to need some funding for research, working with other civic groups and steering projects. Itasca Project in Minneapolis has no paid employees, no public-relations team and no offices, instead relying on a virtual model supported by voluntary donations from the participating CEOs' companies.

"Having principals at the table — principals whose time is precious and who are accustomed not only to making decisions but also to seeing tangible results — ensures our relevance and focuses our attention on what really matters," Davis, the U.S. Bank executive, wrote in a case study of Itasca co-authored by his predecessors, Mary Brainerd and Jim Campbell. "We all know that the work we do must be worth our time."

Charter members joining Good, Skains and Tarwater in Charlotte are: Francisco Alvarado (Marand Builders), Carl Armato (Novant Health), Tim Belk (Belk Inc.), Wil Brooks (State Farm/Wil E. Brooks Agency), David Carroll (Wells Fargo), Ron Carter (Johnson C. Smith University), Ned Curran (Bissell Cos.), Susan DeVore (Premier Inc.), Frank Dowd (Charlotte Pipe & Foundry), Phil Dubois (UNC Charlotte), Frank Emory (Hunton & Williams), Frank Harrison (Coke Consolidated), Chris Kearney (SPX), Michael Lamach (Ingersoll Rand), Brian Moynihan (Bank of America), Tom Nelson (National Gypsum), Peter Pappas (Pappas Properties), Ernie Reigel (Moore & Van Allen), Pat Riley (Allen Tate), Pat Rodgers (Rodgers Builders), Fred Whitfield (Charlotte Hornets) and Lucia Zapata-Griffith (Metro Landmarks).

The co-founders said diversity in gender, race, ethnicity and company size all factored into the composition of the council. Top executives were enlisted to ensure influence and quick decision-making. The co-founders were also insistent that university leaders be included because of the increasing importance of higher education in all economies.

“This is designed to be representative of the current state of the Charlotte economy,” said Skains, the Piedmont Natural Gas CEO. “There’s a lot of interest and excitement and passion about participating.”

The three CEOs declined to name specific issues they will tackle, but they said any important matters lacking a voice, or needing additional voices, would be fair game.

Asked about some of the largest hurdles faced by the executive leadership council, Tarwater had an immediate answer.

“Scheduling,” he said. “That is our biggest challenge, to be sure.”

Erik Spanberg covers government, sports business, hospitality and airlines for the Charlotte Business Journal.