

Charlotte CEOs form new leadership council

HIGHLIGHTS

Duke Energy's Lynn Good will chair new group

Leadership council includes some two dozen prominent local CEOs

Group says it's learning about issues affecting Charlotte, and deciding where to focus



BY ELY PORTILLO

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A new group of the city's most prominent chief executives has formed a leadership council to tackle issues such as economic mobility and education, and fill what some have called a vacuum left by titans of local industry who retired or companies that moved away.

Chaired and co-founded by Duke Energy CEO Lynn Good, the Charlotte Executive Leadership Council includes some two dozen local chief executives, such as co-founding members Tom Skains of Piedmont Natural Gas and Carolinas HealthCare System chief Michael Tarwater.

The group harks back to an earlier era in Charlotte, when an informal network of powerful executives known as "The Group" promoted civic initiatives such as forming the Arts & Science Council and funding the city's uptown transportation center. But Good said this group will be more open, more inclusive and reach out to a broader cross-section of the community.

"There are members of the community who remember when it was a handful of people who really drove the business engagement issues," Good told the Observer on Thursday. "We can't recreate it with two or three people, given how the city's changed"

Still, the group will retain some confidentiality: Meetings won't be open to the public. Good said that's to give council members the ability to discuss issues candidly.

Others on the new council's high-powered membership list include Tim Belk, CEO of retailer Belk, Ned Curran of Ballantyne developer Bissell and Peter Pappas of Pappas Properties, Premier CEO Susan DeVore, Charlotte Hornets president Fred Whifield, and Bank of

America CEO Brian Moynihan. Representing higher education are Phil Dubois, chancellor of UNC Charlotte, and Ron Carter, President of Johnson C. Smith University.

Independent from the Charlotte Chamber and elected bodies, the group will set its own agenda and decide what issues to promote. The new council could wield considerable influence in Charlotte, with executives of the region's biggest employers and most powerful companies delving into issues such as education and transportation.

The group has met twice so far, and is still learning about issues and deciding where to focus, its leaders said. For now, the group has no budget or expenses, and is receiving administrative and program support from the nonprofit Foundation for the Carolinas.

The new executive council intends to help fill the gap left by leaders such as former Bank of America CEO Hugh McColl Jr., a generation that helped mold modern Charlotte.

"We heard it from a variety of areas: Where is the business community? Where's the voice, where's the leadership in the community?" Good said.

The push to start such a group gained momentum last year after the Charlotte Chamber's annual inter-city trip brought local business and elected leaders to Minneapolis. There, they heard about the Itasca Project, a group of about 50 Minneapolis-area CEOs who meet several times a year to discuss and come up with solutions for issues facing the community. They don't employ any staff, and CEO groups lead the individual initiatives.

The Itasca Project has focused on areas such as finding ways to close transit funding gaps, providing consultant teams to help improve the local school system and closing the socioeconomic gap between white and non-white workers in the region.

Skains said the Charlotte council is still figuring out where to direct its energies.

"We're getting grounded," said Skains. "We're taking stock of what's already being done so we can ascertain what we need to focus on."

The first Group

The new group is reminiscent of a past collection of Charlotte CEOs, this one known as "The Group" – capitalized for a reason.

The Group referred to leaders of the city's biggest businesses who met informally throughout the 1980s and 1990s to tackle various civic issues. Made up of such household names in local industry as bank CEOs McColl and Ed Crutchfield, Duke Energy's Bill Lee, Observer publisher Rolfe Neill and John Belk, department store scion and former Charlotte mayor, members gathered informally and decided what their city needed.

"We'd see something that needed to be done and, hell, we'd do it," McColl told the Observer in 2009.

Members of The Group pushed various projects that helped define Charlotte, such as abandoning railroad tracks so a convention center could be built, financing a possible NBA franchise, finding land for an NFL stadium and building the uptown transit center. McColl and former Charlotte Mayor Richard Vinroot worked together on that last project, which resulted in a privately funded, \$10 million transit center built on a \$7 million parcel of city land.

But as Charlotte, and its biggest businesses, grew, some of that local focus was lost. Even though local businesses still contribute to prominent civic initiatives and charities, many of the region's most prominent local companies have outgrown their regional footprint, or aren't even around anymore. Belk is exploring selling itself. Family Dollar was sold to Virginia-based Dollar Tree, and Wachovia disappeared years ago, bought by San Francisco-based Wells Fargo. Bank of America CEO Brian Moynihan lives in Boston.

While companies have grown, changed – and in some cases, moved their headquarters – Tarwater said that hasn't diluted those companies' commitment to Charlotte. Most of them still employ hundreds or thousands of people locally, such as Wells Fargo, which didn't move Wachovia's workers out when it bought the Charlotte bank.

“Those companies are still very invested in this community, and there’s somebody at a very high level in the C-suite of those companies who are interested,” said Tarwater. “They still represent those companies, even though the corporate headquarters may be somewhere else. There’s not really a void in that respect.”

And the city is more racially, culturally and geographically diverse than in decades past, with different communities growing and sprawling from past UNC Charlotte to Ballantyne. Including voices from those different communities – and not just focusing on the narrow wishes of prominent CEOs – will be important to the initiative’s success, the new group said.

“It’s not a handful of leaders driving the business community in Charlotte,” said Skains. “This is designed to tap into that broader leadership in the community.”

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NEW CEO LEADERSHIP COUNCIL MEMBERS

The new Charlotte Executive Leadership Council includes some of the area’s most prominent CEOs and business leaders. Here’s the full membership list.

- Lynn Good, CEO of Duke Energy (chairwoman and founding member)
- Tom Skains, CEO of Piedmont Natural Gas (founding member)
- Michael Tarwater, CEO of Carolinas Healthcare System
- Francisco Alvarado, CEO of Marand Builders
- Carl Armato, CEO of Novant Health
- Tim Belk, CEO of Belk
- Wil Brooks, owner of State Farm – Wil E. Brooks Agency
- David Carroll, Senior EVP of Wells Fargo
- Ron Carter, President of Johnson C. Smith University
- Ned Curran, CEO of Bissell
- Susan DeVore, CEO of Premier
- Frank Dowd, CEO of Charlotte Pipe and Foundry
- Phil Dubois, Chancellor of UNC Charlotte
- Frank Emory, Partner of Hunton & Williams
- Frank Harrison, CEO of Coca Cola Consolidated
- Chris Kearney, CEO of SPX
- Michael Lamach, CEO of Ingersoll Rand
- Brian Moynihan, CEO of Bank of America
- Tom Nelson, CEO of National Gypsum
- Peter Pappas, founder of Pappas Properties
- Ernie Reigel, Managing Partner of Moore & Van Allen
- Pat Riley, President of Allen Tate
- Pat Rodgers, CEO of Rodgers Builders
- Fred Whitfield, President of Charlotte Hornets
- Lucia Zapata-Griffith, CEO of Metro Landmarks
- Michael Marsicano, CEO of Foundation for the Carolinas (Administrative and program assistance)

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John Keels · Technician at Alphanumeric Systems, Inc.

I think there is promise in this approach. It obviously worked in Minneapolis and in Minnesota. That state has nearly the best economy right now with the lowest unemployment. However, my own concern is that they do not have a channel to funnel money under the table in to the pocket books and back pockets of local, state, and federal politicians. It would corrupt the whole promise of such a group of leaders and there is already WAY too much corporate lobbying and money going from business into the back pockets to politicians for "legislative favors" to begin with.

Like Reply 4 hrs



Jeff Thompson · Myers Park High School

Lord help us ALL !!!

Like Reply 1 4 hrs



Dave Thompson · Charlotte, North Carolina

Whatever deity it is you're invoking, I think said deity has already helped Charlotte through the assembling of this group.

Like Reply 4 hrs



Janet Collins · The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

I recall the group that exited in the early 80's, a group that not only put up ideas but put up money and their own people's leadership to make those ideas happen. They were visionaries and they were leaders. Sadly I seem to recall this very paper running a numbers of negative articles on them and eventually the group went away because of that bad press. They were often referred to as the "uptown crowd" by politicians, and for the most part they were but they made the entire city a better place. I hope the CO will be more accepting this time around.

While on the topic, I believe "The Squar... See More

Like Reply 2 4 hrs



Zane Isaac

Perfect! They are ALL white. What could possibly be better than that.

Like Reply 4 hrs



Rebecca Smith · Charlotte, North Carolina

I don't know where you are getting your information or are assuming by the photo, but there are at least 5 minorities on that list. I stopped counting after that, so there could be more.

Like Reply 1 4 hrs



Mark Burch

Nice try, but you're wrong. Trying to stir up race issues? Try being part of the solution.

Like Reply 4 hrs



Phil Moran

There goes Zany again with the racial ranting.....with Zero research or facts. Zane Isaac is nothing more than a despicable black racist troll who does nothing on these boards but attack other posters and spew racial hatred.

Like Reply 3 hrs



Rob Townsend

It is unfortunate that the Observer doesn't have a well-respected leader to add to this group as it did for generations.

Like Reply 5 hrs



Lloyd Scher · Substitute Teacher at Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

This is what makes Charlotte such a great place to live. This is a great group of leaders and all they want to do is make Charlotte even greater.

Like Reply 4 5 hrs