

Commentary: Don't be shy, CEOs, in shaping Charlotte

HIGHLIGHTS

25 leaders will meet regularly to tackle Charlotte's challenges

It's a welcome effort at reengaging CEOs in community

They seemed deferential Thursday; here's hoping they aren't overly cautious about stepping on toes



(L to R) Tom Skains, CEO of Piedmont Natural Gas, Lynn Good, CEO of Duke Energy, Mike Tarwater, CEO of Carolina Healthcare System. | **T. Ortega Gaines** - ogaines@charlotteobserver.com

BY TAYLOR BATTEN

The CEOs, like the Blues Brothers, are getting the band back together. Let's hope they have an easier time of it than Jake and Elwood did.

Long-time Charlotte residents know the history: Charlotte blossomed from quiet Southern town to thriving major city over the past few decades largely because of the decisions and dedication of a small group of white men who loved the city and used their power to help shape it.

They were the CEOs of the banks and utilities, the department stores and the newspaper. They saw building the city as both a personal passion and an integral part of their jobs of growing successful companies.

They met in secret and sought no public input. But they were, generally, people of great character, and both their altruism and their self-interest led them to throw their muscle behind making Charlotte a better place. While the model today seems paternalistic, it worked. Oh, how it worked.

Things changed, though. Charlotte grew. The corporate leaders retired. Their industries evolved, and the new leaders focused less on their hometown's challenges and more on the complicated demands of running a global enterprise.

Talented individuals have stepped up and made things happen since then, of course. But the earlier bunch was replaced by a scattershot array of politicians, nonprofit leaders, business people and others – and rarely a cohesive group of leaders with vision.

For years, we’ve needed to get the band back together, modernized to meet the demands and expectations of a bigger, more diverse city. Thursday, we got it – maybe.

CEOs Lynn Good of Duke Energy, Tom Skains of Piedmont Natural Gas and Michael Tarwater of Carolinas Healthcare System announced the creation of the Charlotte Executive Leadership Council. Twenty-five top leaders – most of them CEOs – will meet three to four times a year to discuss how they can influence Charlotte’s trajectory. Their mission: “To advocate for solutions that improve Charlotte’s economic vitality and quality of life for everyone.”

Paternalistic? No. The danger with this group is not that they’ll bulldoze over what others are doing to get their way. If anything, I worry they’ll be too passive and deferential. The leaders talked a lot Thursday about 10-year plans and studying issues and being careful not to supplant the work of others.

That’s all fine. But when these 25 get together, that is one smart and powerful table. Charlotte faces urgent and complex challenges and needs the forceful leadership that a slate like that can provide.

The group is not perfect. It includes just four women and four African-Americans, and several of Charlotte’s biggest corporations are not at the table. They will meet privately but pledge to keep the public informed of their work.

Charlotte’s changed a lot in 30 years, and we don’t want to go back to a clique calling all the shots. We do want business leaders deeply invested not only in their bottom line but in community. Thursday’s announcement was a promising start.

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