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Headlines

West Point asked to support conversation on race

By **CY WOOD**

WEST POINT — The City of West Point was asked Tuesday to assist in funding a program planned for Troup County to encourage a conversation on race and trust building.

Former Troup County Chairman Ricky Wolfe and former State Rep. Carl Von Epps were present at the Mayor and City Council work session to lay out the ambitious plan to promote racial harmony and trust throughout the county.

Wolfe explained that while commission chairman he met regularly with the mayors of Troup's three municipalities, and it quickly became evident that any topic up for discussion eventually would lead to race. "This racial divide keeps us from solving problems," he said.

Looking into what other communities are doing to address the issue, Wolfe said they found some programs but none in Georgia. By the time he and Epps were both retired from public office, they were asked to look into solutions.

They eventually found two organizations, **Southern Truth and Reconciliation (STAR)** in Atlanta and Hope in the Cities (based in Richmond, Va.), that had shown effectiveness in addressing racial divisions.

"This will probably be the hardest work we have ever done," Wolfe said. "How do you rebuild lost trust?"

Wolfe outlined how during March 40 Troup residents gathered at LaGrange College for an initial session focusing on having a conversation about race. The participants learned a lot about themselves and others during the two days, he said.

The Troup program envisioned by Wolfe and Epps would have three levels. The first level would involve training similar to what that initial group of 40 received. Over the course of 18 months, four groups of 40 would be trained. They would then go to level 2, where they would be taught the tools needed to engage in conversations that build trust. Finally, three to five of the group would be designated as facilitators, who would go forward with the program.

Initially, the expertise would come from STAR and Hope in the Cities. Ultimately, Wolfe said, Troup's facilitators would handle the program as it proceeded.

He noted that for the program to be successful, Troup residents have to acknowledge the past and its impacts, but many people are reluctant to confront their history. "It's hard to accept the truth for some people," he said.

He said the program would require a budget of about \$150,000 and they are asking local governments to provide the seed money and to support the effort.

Epps said the bottom line is trust building.

Wolfe asked for feedback from the council.

Councilmember Jerry Ledbetter said it was a great idea and much needed, just 35 years late.

Councilmember Ben Wilcox said he would like to know more about the budget for the work. Wolfe said \$107,000 was earmarked for training, \$30,000 for travel expenses for STAR and Hope in the Cities staff and \$20,000 for administrative expenses, which he said he would prefer to get through volunteers.

He noted that he and Epps were not being compensated. Once the program is in place, fundraising should keep it going, not government funding, he said.

Wilcox asked where the 160 would come from, and Wolfe said all over the county. Of the facilitators, he asked if one would be in West Point.

Wolfe responded that the facilitators would work wherever they were needed.

Councilmember Steve Trammell asked how far the program was from starting. Wolfe said the next meeting with the first group of 40 is set for June 6, so it's a tight timeline. He would like to have another group of 40 start in July, he said.

Councilmember Sandra Thornton asked about the outcome in Richmond, and Wolfe noted that one councilwoman there said that without the program, the city would be financially, morally and spiritually bankrupt.

Councilmember Gloria Marshall said she saw the need to build trust, noting that as a child she was taught she couldn't trust white people, and suspected white children were taught the same about black people.

Wolfe said the cost of the program needs to be weighed against the cost of doing nothing and allowing the racial divide in Troup County to continue to thwart progress here.

Mayor Drew Ferguson IV said that in talking with people he has sensed "a hunger for something like this" and assured Wolfe the city would act on his request as quickly as possible. "I want to learn how to have this discussion the right way," he said.

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