



Roadmap for City Growth: Have Your Say

Samaria Bailey | October 23, 2014

The Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce (GPCC) asked residents for ideas on how to grow the city economically at its Roadmap for Growth: A Vision for the City of Philadelphia tour at the Shiloh Baptist Church this week.

It was the second stop of the tour, which is an effort of the GPCC to find out what type of growth residents want to see in terms of job creation, small business growth and commercial and residential development.

GPCC said its aim is to have this input used as reference points for the next mayoral and city council elections.

“We are trying to take this campaign about creating jobs and promoting economic growth in as many councilmanic districts as we can,” said Joe Grace, director of public policy for GPCC. “We are encouraging people to participate, so we can spark a citywide conversation [and] promote for the next mayor and city council the set of ideas about positive economic growth.”

The GPCC began the meeting by presenting demographic and economic statistics of the city, one of which was particularly glaring as it stated the change in median income for Blacks, or African-American, citizens in Philadelphia between 2000 and 2012 was from \$26,217 to 27,828.

Grace and City Council man Kenyatta Johnson fielded questions after the presentation.

Residents provided a range of answers but most held the same themes. Cleaner and safer streets, decreased small business taxes, investment in a skilled workforce, improved access to credit and loans and blight removal were cited as key to encouraging development and small business growth. A better education system, safer streets and tax credits were suggested as answers to retain people in the city.

“Poverty in the city is huge and to attack something like that, you need a huge solution,” said Diane Inverso, senior director of the Mayor’s Commission on Literacy and a district resident. She spoke on behalf of both interests. The best solution to fighting poverty and growing the city was building a good, skilled workforce — with not just a traditional education, but having the populous recognize career pathways, she said.

For M. Shikomba, 72, a retired principal, a diversified industrial presence is key. She said the “service” industry is outpacing others in the city.



Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce PCC director of public policy Joe Grace (left) and City Councilman Kenyatta Johnson discuss feedback provided by residents at a “Roadmap for Growth: A Vision for the City of Philadelphia” listening session this week.

— Photo by Samaria Bailey

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"If you are limited to service industries, you are going to get crushed," she said. "Do something that will attract people. [Bring] in Apple or Amazon, [companies] that need storage spaces."

Then speaking specifically about her neighborhood, she encouraged citizens to pay attention to a bill in front of city council that will convert the Washington Avenue area into condos.

"Let's keep Washington [Avenue] light industrial," she said.

Referencing the Washington Avenue development bill that will allow condos to be built in what has been used as industrial space, Johnson said he was in favor of balance.

"You have to have a healthy balance of both. The neighborhood is changing and as the neighborhood changes, you will see different needs," he said. "So you want to make sure you have a combination of commercial, industrial and residential."

But even in the midst of such development, said Johnson, there must be policies in place that protect residents from being pushed out of their homes. At press time, his office had a meeting scheduled with the North of Washington Avenue Committee to discuss Board of Revisions of Tax hearings and the Longtime Owner Occupants Program. It helps qualifying residents with a tax discount.

"We want to make sure long term residents are not priced out their homes," he said. "[And] we want to make sure they have the necessary tools available to them — the Homestead Exemption tax relief program, the tax deferral program and ... enough affordable housing to allow individuals, regardless of their income background, to reside in these neighborhoods."

"We want no one to lose their homes based on them being priced out ... as a result of development and high taxes."

Johnson said more than 17 taxes have an impact on small businesses in Philadelphia. "The tax system is the reason why businesses move to other cities and states. So we must find ways to reduce the significant amount of taxes that are a heavy burden on our small businesses."

As for improving schools, Johnson said, "We must come up with a new formula on how we fund public education [and] we also must make sure the leadership in Harrisburg does not treat the Philadelphia public school system as a stepchild."

There are more Roadmap for Growth tours scheduled in neighborhoods throughout the city, including one Oct. 28, 6:30 pm, with At-large Councilwoman Blondell Reynolds Brown and the Arts & Business Council, Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, 100 N 20th St., Towne Hall Room. (This Listening Tour will have a focus on the arts and culture community.)

Another tour will be held Nov. 5, 6-7:30 pm, with 4th District Councilman Curtis Jones, Crown Plaza, 4010 City Ave.

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