CAN PHILADELPHIA'S NEW AND DIFFERENT DELEGATION TO HARRISBURG MEAN ANYTHING NEW AND DIFFERENT FOR PHILADELPHIA?
John Baer | January 21, 2019

In broad terms, this is noteworthy.

Philly's delegation to Harrisburg for the two-year session just getting started has a look and feel that belies the inert ineffectiveness (or downright criminality) often associated with city legislators.

That association will be hard to shake.

But right out of the gate, the delegation's Democratic House members offer a whiff of change. And a refreshing pledge of accountability.

They're pushing a plan to attack Philadelphia’s persistent poverty, which, at a rate of 26 percent (400,000 people) ranks first among the nation's 10 largest cities.

The delegation's “Philadelphia Platform,” released at a Capitol news conference last week, is built on data from government, nonprofits and think tanks such as the Pew Charitable Trusts.

It identifies policy priorities to expand workforce development in schools and for adults, provide more aid to small businesses and neighborhoods, reform criminal justice, and enhance infrastructure for schools and SEPTA.

It carries no price tag.
I know, I know, you’ve heard it before. Why would a Republican legislature buy in? Where does the money come from? Isn’t this just a publicity stunt?

Oh, and doesn’t Harrisburg view Philly as a crime-ridden rat hole ruled by cronyism bent on wasting tax dollars on unyielding urban ills?

Good questions. And, yes.

But there is something different here.

For starters, there’s a new delegation chairman, North Philly Rep. Jason Dawkins, 34, a former aide to City Councilwoman Maria Quiñones-Sánchez.

Plus, like Dawkins, most of the current 23 Philly House Democrats are new by Harrisburg standards -- in office five years or less, and many are under 40.

This is a change. For decades, the delegation was made up of members serving for decades.

Also, five of the 23 are newly elected, and include a prominent immigration lawyer and former Temple Law professor (Rep. Joseph Hohenstein), a former WHYY journalist (Rep. Elizabeth Fiedler) and a 28-year old community activist (Rep. Malcolm Kenyatta) who headed diversity efforts at the Chamber of Commerce for Greater Philadelphia and who’s a grandson of the late nationally known civil rights leader Muhammad Kenyatta.

(Another new legislator is due after a special election in March to replace former Rep. Vanessa Lowery Brown, who resigned last month following a bribery conviction.)

So, younger, diverse, arguably better credentialed and maybe more aggressive than delegations past. In short, a changing of the guard.

Their platform came from more than a year’s effort by a working group started by then-freshman Rep. Jared Solomon, and including Reps. Donna Bullock, Jordan Harris, Chris Rabb and Joanna McClinton.

Members stress the delegation's energy, interest and accountability.

"It's going to mean a more forward-looking, aggressive approach to the issues facing our city, the biggest being poverty and putting people to work," says Solomon.

He adds, “It’s an accountability document. There are 23 specific policy proposals. At the end of two years, our constituents should ask, 'Did they produce?'”

Dawkins says, “Our goal was to be unified for once. We’ve never been able to develop a plan from a generational standpoint that attacks poverty and joblessness at a young age and through school to adulthood … there’s a direct correlation between poor educational opportunities and poor job wages.”

They also say Republicans like parts of the plan, especially workforce development (an issue high on the GOP agenda). It’s been discussed with House GOP Leader Bryan Cutler, and a meeting is planned with House Speaker Mike Turzai in a few weeks.

Fiedler says, “It’s exciting for those of us who ran because we saw how many structural problems we have. And I think it’s long past time for the delegation to be united on so many important issues to our city.”

Among issues being pushed: more apprenticeship programs, more paid internships, more grants and low-interest loans to minority- and female-owned businesses, funding to cut probation and parole caseloads, and more resources to get illegal guns off the streets, including declaring a state of emergency.

The ask here is huge. The effort required to get big parts of it is monumental. As Dawkins put it, "It's a long road ahead."

But Rabb says, “It's easy to stay on the sidelines and say it'll never work. It's an agenda that helps the economy of Pennsylvania.”

It's also an incremental project, one that reflects an apparent shift in representing Philadelphia in Harrisburg.

For the first time in a long time, the delegation seems interested in fighting for change that looks toward the next generation instead of just the next election.

That itself is noteworthy.

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