

Diversity in Planning Network Breakfasts

The Diversity Network Breakfasts sponsored by VAPA are intended to provide educational opportunities for Virginia planners interested on issues related to promote inclusiveness and diversity within the profession.

While the benefits of having a diverse team of planners seems to be a widely accepted premise among many serving in managerial positions, few seem to believe that such diversity could be achieved without encouragement and the leadership willing to make it happen. Having the opportunity to get to know other colleagues, sharing ideas and experiences and raise awareness and encourage the membership to get involved is a valuable service that VAPA provides to its membership.

The first network breakfast sponsored by VAPA, took place on January 18th, 2005, at the City of Hampton's History Museum. Professionals from all over Hampton Roads region attended and shared their thoughts and experiences. A panel discussion with the participation of three accomplished planners included: Rhonda Mack, Director of Planning & Community Development, Elizabeth City, NC, Leon Hughes, Director of Planning, Prince George County, VA and Don Davis, Chief of Comprehensive Planning, James City County, VA and Charter member of Gays and Lesbians in Planning (GALIP).



Attendants to diversity breakfast include planners represent a wide cross section of VAPA membership.

The panelists shared the challenges and opportunities that they have experienced during their career as planners with a "non-conventional" background. Without a doubt the most positive and beneficial outcome of the event was the open dialogue and sharing that took place among all attendees. It became obvious that many of the people in attendance recognized that the lack of diversity in the planning profession reduces the opportunities of learning from our differences and limits our ability to connect with the communities we serve. Those on managerial positions that attended the meeting expressed their interest in exploring ideas to promote positive change.

While no “official next steps” came out of the breakfast, we realized that just having the opportunity to be in one location on a regular basis to share ideas, issues, concerns and problems was a major step in the right direction. Therefore, we scheduled the second networking breakfast.

This breakfast, held in the City of Norfolk at Parsons Brinckerhoff and Douglas, Inc.(PB&D) focused on people with an educational background in planning but working in an alternative field. The meeting started with a special presentation by Chuck Cayton, Regional Manager for PB&D, who shared with us the challenges that managers face to maintain and nurture a diverse pool on employees.



Irayda Ruiz, Co-Chair of ECDC welcomes attendants and acknowledges PB&D for sponsoring the event.

Our panel included Steven Wright, Assistant Director of Economic Development, City of Suffolk, Nicole Thompson, Manager of Special Programs and Districts for the City of Norfolk and Scott Silsdorf, Senior Planner for PB&D. Panelists shared their interests in the planning field and the reasons for leaving the profession to, in most cases, working in less traditional fields such as economic development or specialized consulting. Participants attending this meeting began talking about ways to increase the public’s knowledge of the importance of the planning professional, especially among young minorities who might pursue a career in planning. A conversation followed about the opportunities presented by individuals with a non-traditional planning background. In Hampton Roads for example, the opportunity of taking advantage of the diverse pool of retirees and military personnel were also topics of discussion.



Chuck Cayton, Regional Manager for PB&D speaking to attendants of Diversity Breakfast.

Thanks to the hospitality of Sheila Mcallister, Assistant Director of Planning for the City of Newport News the third networking breakfast took place on June 9th at the City Center located in Oyster Point Newport News. Mitchell Silver, Director of Planning at the City of Raleigh NC and past-chair of APA's Diversity taskforce provided an overview of the Second Minority Summit held at the National APA conference in San Francisco in March of this year. Joseph Curtis, transportation consultant with PB&D's Norfolk office and one of the organizers for the network breakfasts, provided the local perspective of the opportunities and challenges to implement the recommendations of the Second Minority Summit.



A group of attendants to the third Diversity Breakfast held in Newport News Va.

As a result of the third meeting a new group of volunteers led by Joseph Curtis AICP and Olivia Krahenbill, was formed to identify a strategy to promote planning in schools and encourage minority youth to pursue planning as a profession.

The fourth diversity breakfast took place on October 6th 2005 at the Design and Development Center of the City of Norfolk located in Downtown of Norfolk. The vice-chair of Governor Warner Latino Advisory Committee: Ms. Beatriz Aberman was the guest speaker. She made a presentation about Latinos issues and trends in Virginia.

It is expected that the Diversity Network Breakfasts will become regular events held several times a year and will take place on several locations throughout the Commonwealth. To date these events have been possible thanks to the support of local public and private organizations such as the Citizen's Unity Commission of the City of Hampton and Parsons Brinckerhoff and Douglas, Inc., and to the contributions and volunteer work of many fellow enthusiastic members of our Virginia planning community. There is not enough space to thank them all individually, but they know who they are and we are very grateful for their support and hope to continue see them in the upcoming events!

Want to join our efforts to encourage diversity in Virginia planning? Please contact any of the members of the Ethnic and Cultural Diversity Committee of VAPA.