

PREAMBLE: BUILDING EQUITY AND OPPORTUNITY IN GREATER GRAND RAPIDS

Signs of renaissance abound in the City of Grand Rapids. Cranes and construction dominate the urban heart of Downtown. The city is on track to recover all of its pre-recession population and now claims one of the nation's strongest real estate markets. And Forbes recently declared the regional economy one of the fastest-growing in the U.S.

Yet this rapid expansion is contrasted by a costly degree of deepening racial inequity. Poverty, for example, grew faster across greater Grand Rapids in recent years than it did in Detroit. The unemployment rate exceeds 25 and 50 percent for Hispanic and Black citizens, respectively, in our urban neighborhoods. Even in Downtown Grand Rapids, generally perceived as affluent, 66 percent of residents earn less than the area median income.

Clearly, conventional economic recovery and growth is not sufficient to solve the persistent racial and ethnic inequity in our community. We need a fundamentally new approach to systemically achieve growth with prosperity that is widely shared by all residents in the "new" Grand Rapids.

Toward this necessary end, *GR Forward* recommends a series of sound strategies to simultaneously promote growth, equity of opportunity, and a more welcoming Downtown. Please find a summary of these proposed actions, targets, and success measures on page 34 of the full *GR Forward* plan. These recommendations reflect what we heard from thousands of citizens and stakeholders who participated in *GR Forward's* extensive engagement process.

GR Forward charts a new path of policy and programs to advance the ongoing work of championing diversity and inclusion while building equity in Downtown Grand Rapids. But Downtown alone cannot overcome our community's legacy with racial inequity.

By design, the *GR Forward* process focused rigorously on improving Downtown Grand Rapids and a limited reach of the Grand River corridor. Meanwhile the trends and patterns of development - housing, transportation, education, health and business - that create the conditions for people to flourish (or not) play out across a much broader geographic area.

Pursuing equity, then, requires regional thinking, solutions and collaborative action, just as any meaningful approach to grow and sustain the economy depends on a regional strategy.

The time for this region-wide conversation and agenda is overdue. The demography of metro Grand Rapids, like the State of Michigan and the nation as a whole, continues to grow more racially and ethnically diverse.

Ninety percent of the metro population was white in 1980. Since then, people of color grew from less than 9 to more than 20 percent of the population. The Latino population is growing the fastest locally and is projected to approach 25 percent of the city's total population by 2040. The trends suggest Grand Rapids will grow much more multicultural than it is today.

This diverse and growing multicultural population contributes significantly to the local community. But unintentional and intentional racial bias and persistent racial gaps in employment, income and other opportunities

too often limit the ability of people of color to contribute equally to our city and region. Across the board, people of color earn less and have less access to advanced levels of learning than their white neighbors and friends in greater Grand Rapids.

This inequity undermines our values of fairness, decency and justice. It also weakens our economy. Indeed, the metro Grand Rapids economy would generate \$3.3 billion more annually absent existing racial income gaps, based on research by the National Equity Atlas. The costs of racial inequity will only grow - low wages, decreased workforce skill, and reduced purchasing power to cite a few indicators - as the community becomes more diverse. Without intentional action, these disparities will widen.

An equity-driven growth model, by sharp contrast, will make Downtown Grand Rapids and West Michigan stronger by expanding opportunities for everyone to participate and prosper.

Bold and committed leadership is necessary to set the region on a path of racially equitable and inclusive growth, and empower more people with the right to determine their future. The private sector must take the lead in generating truly equitable and inclusive growth. The public sector can support the movement by establishing an effective framework of civic goals, policies, investments, incentives, strategies and mutual accountability to guide the growth.

What's urgently necessary is a collaborative regional approach that recognizes our growing diversity has real potential to drive more robust economic growth, and focuses on building racial equity, increasing opportunity, and pursuing economic justice to ensure the metro area grows into a great place to live, learn, work and play - for everybody.