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Detroit schools, transit among main dishes at 'Pancakes and Politics'

Catherine Jun / The Detroit News

Detroit -- The city of Detroit can't turn around without better schools and a public transportation system.

That was the consensus among four political and policy heavyweights who gathered for "Pancakes and Politics," a breakfast forum at the Detroit Athletic Club this morning.

Panelists included Detroit City Council President Monica Conyers; Peter Karmanos Jr., Chairman and CEO of Compuware Corp.; Kurt Metzger, director of Detroit Area Community Information System; and Phil Power, president of the Center for Michigan.

The headlining conversation topics for the event were race and the regional economy. But the attendees pointed to two specific items -- the failing Detroit Public Schools district and the lack of an efficient mass transit system -- as problems hampering the revitalization of the city.

"Racism isn't keeping us down," Metzger said. "It's the fact that we have a culture that doesn't value education."

Karmanos, himself the product of Detroit Public Schools, blamed the district's decline on out-migration from the city, lack of tax funding and the teacher's union.

"The fact of the matter is, when I went to Detroit Public Schools, when it was the best school district ... teachers weren't part of the union. Today, every teacher is part of the union."

During the hour-long discussion, Power emphasized that a mass transit system was the major hurdle to drawing people back to Detroit.

"It inhibits people from getting from place to place, getting to work, going shopping," Power said.

While Conyers agreed in the merits of such a system, she said the responsibility to bring it online is shared by the region.

"It can't be just Detroiters who want mass transit," Conyers said.

All of the panelists agreed that efforts to bring about positive changes in the city and the region

have been hampered by divisive politics.

Cobo Hall was a case in point.

Conyers, who has verbally sparred with Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson in the press over the fate of Cobo Hall, said: "I did reach out to him again, and he said he's not coming back to the table, and I don't think that's the spirit of cooperation."

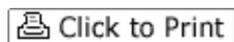
The discussion took a break from heftier issues when Karmanos fielded an anonymous question from one of the forum's attendees, who were primarily local business and political leaders. The question: How was Kwame Kilpatrick doing? The former mayor, who left disgraced in a text-messaging scandal, is now working for a Compuware subsidiary in Texas.

"He's learning. He's doing a very, very, very good job," Karmanos said. "I saw him in our lunchroom yesterday and said hello."

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