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Panelists tackle schools, politics, mass transit at breakfast forum

By [Nancy Kaffer](#)

Better schools, regional cooperation and regional mass transit — those were the topics that dominated Thursday morning's *Michigan Chronicle's* Pancakes & Politics forum, the second of the 2009 season.

The topics of discussion were race, the economy and the region.

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

Karmanos, a graduate of the **Detroit Public Schools**, said he'd moved his family out of the city in the 1970s, when his then-first-grade son who couldn't yet read was given an A in reading because he was the best student in class.

Karmanos said he favors a consolidated metro area school district.

"We have 110 school districts in the metro area... why don't we consolidate those school systems for the metro area?" he said. "Instead of talking about regionalism, let's have some, and let's start with education."

Power and Metzger said they favor a ward system for the Detroit City Council over the current at-large system.

Conyers said she favors term limits, saying council needs fresh faces.

Power said that in a series of community conversations his organization has held, regional transit has emerged over and over as the top issue for young people.

Conyers advocated business development in the city, saying Detroit's abandoned buildings could house retail outlets — like a development she has frequented as a visitor to Reading, Penn. — that would increase the city's viability as a destination.

The council president said she feels that a federal earmark could provide for the expansion of Detroit's Cobo Center, but said she felt that state and regional leaders had adopted an uncompromising stance.

Conyers questioned why **Oakland County** Executive L. Brooks Patterson is applauded for being fiercely protective of his constituents' interests, while Conyers said she is denigrated for standing up for Detroiters.

Metzger suggested that to advance regionalism and economic improvement in the city, politicians should "get out of the way, and let the people who want to solve these issues (get it done). Politics are a smokescreen."

One question from an audience member, directed to Karmanos, asked how former Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick was faring in his new role as an account executive at **Covisint**, a Compuware business unit.

Karmanos said Kilpatrick was doing a fine job.

"Some of the people he works for are in this room, and I think they would tell you he's a breath of fresh air," he said.

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